

Mozambique's Army bogged down by the Warsaw Pact rulebook

MAPUTO — Eight years after Mozambique gained independence from Portugal, the old slogan of Frelimo, the country's only party — "The fight goes on" — is still as meaningful as ever. It must even be taken literally. For four years now, Samora Machel's government has been grappling with, and unsuccessfully trying to smash, a rebellion that it made the mistake of underestimating for far too long.

Today, the Frelimo is fully conscious of the real balance of power in the country and the danger that the Mozambique National Resistance (RNM) represents. It has declared 1983 to be "the year of the global struggle against armed bandits".

Since 1979, the RNM has steadily grown in numbers and widened its field of operations. It is now operating in ten of the country's 11 provinces. Only Cabo Delgado in the extreme north, the cradle and stronghold of Frelimo, has been spared so far. Manica and Sofala, provinces in the country's narrow central waistband are still the rebellion's main hotbeds. The Beira-Maputo road, the only land link between the centre and the south, is practically unusable. The RNM very recently moved into the sparsely inhabited areas of Zambezi, Gaza and Inhambane provinces, as well as the regions of Tete and Maputo. Some coastal towns like Inhambane and Vilanculos are almost totally cut off and supplied largely from the sea.

The RNM is said to have between 8,000 and 12,000 men. General Sebastiao Mbote, chief of staff of the Mozambique Army, thinks an average of 1,000 rebels are to be found in every one of the provinces concerned. But some of them are part-time fighters, as it were, joining the RNM depending on the seasons and needs. It is impossible to know how many of them have been press-ganged. Some families tag on behind the rebels, especially if the

latter has the means for feeding them.

Food is a weapon in this war which knows neither fronts nor real battles. When the Mozambique Army manages to provide a reasonable amount of food to villagers, the quality of the intelligence it obtains improves remarkably. Besides, the rebels are well equipped. According to some, each guerrilla fighter carries a pistol, an automatic rifle and a bazooka. They have excellent radio communications, but no sophisticated heavy weaponry or transport. They move around on foot.

The RNM uses standard guerrilla tactics, harassing convoys, storming garrisons in rural areas, laying ambushes, destroying warehouses and carrying out economic sabotage — bridges, railway lines and high tension lines being the targets — and assassinating ("to set an example") local officials. Kidnappings of foreigners and missionaries, later freed unharmed enables the rebels to keep public interest in Europe. The RNM at the moment holds five foreigners. The most recent kidnapping — of an Italian technician — took place in April.

None of the RNM's strikes, however, suggests the existence of a genuine guerrilla army, a unified command and closely coordinated activities. The rebels swoop on an isolated target in force, occupy a village for a few hours, burn crops (30,000 metric tons of grain were lost in this way last year), then melt back into the bush. They seldom try to take on Frelimo units and merely make the most of the enemy's weak points — insufficient numbers, poor logistics and indifferent fighting prowess. The Mozambique Army is 20,000 strong, but would need at least twice as many to be able to get on top of the situation.

The RNM's flaws are its political inconsistency, the absence of a specific ethnic group around which

to consolidate its hold, and the use of terror rather than persuasion. The RNM "visits" villages, but does not "work" them thoroughly. Unlike Frelimo during its liberation struggle, the RNM leaves no political structures behind. The rebels claim that after ten years of struggle Frelimo was never able to move about in such large areas, but so far they have not set up a single authentic "liberated zone".

Last year the rebels launched two offensives — the first in Zambezi province in August, and the second in December in the south. The counter-offensive, masterminded by

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General Mabote, pushed back the rebels who had infiltrated within 100 kilometres of the capital. Since then, the army has restored the situation north of Maputo. It would be risky to conclude that the RNM is on the wane, for the lull noted in recent weeks is also an indication of a change in Frelimo policy.

For a long time, the government said nothing about the rebels' activities, and this spawned a spate of wild rumours. Then the press gave the war wide coverage enabling the government to justify, at home, the setting up of a people's militia and, on the foreign front, to buttress its accusations against South Africa which is providing the RNM with vital logistical support, silence is again the rule in government circles.

Skirmishes with the rebels resumed a few weeks ago, but nobody mentions it. At the end of April, a team was prevented from helping drought victims in an area 80 kilometres from the capital because of the prevailing insecurity. The International Red Cross Committee in Maputo is running an orthopaedic centre exclusively for war amputees. Judging by the rate of admissions on average 40 wounded every month — and by the size of the waiting list (about 22), the fighting has scarcely abated. One of every two wounded is a civilian. Many casualties are women blown up by landmines while looking for water in the bush.

The government is careful not to crow. "The enemy," predicted General Mabote in February, "will reorganise thanks to their permanent ties with South Africa." Counter-insurgency measures were stepped up. And for the first time since independence, four government opponents were shot in January before a couple of thousand spectators in a small town north of Maputo. Two ministers watched this summary execution. Following a collective trial in February, the Beira revolutionary military court sentenced five RNM members to death and six foreigners — five Portuguese and a Briton to long prison terms for involvement in sabotaging the port. Since capital punishment was brought back in 1979 for "crimes against state security", some 50 persons have gone before the firing squad.

The government has taken a variety of measures to "better defend the socialist homeland". In March 1982, provincial military commands were turned over to officers — frequently former Frelimo guerrillas — from the regions where they serve and who know the local people and speak their language. In June last year it set up a basic 35-day para-military training course particularly for workers entrusted with the job of defending their plants. Some of them preferred to quit their jobs

rather than handle rifles before starting a working day which often as not dragged on because of political meetings.

Former reservists were called up to officer the newly formed people's militias. Officers who had become bureaucrats resumed active duty and weapons were broken out and distributed to the people — a gesture more symbolic than practical for the rifles so generously handed out were without ammunition.

The army's main weakness stems from the kind of aid it is getting from the Soviet Union, aid totally unsuitable to guerrilla fighting. With independence, the victorious revolution dismissed most of the often ill-educated guerrillas considered unfit for retraining in a "modern army". At Moscow's suggestion, the government bought heavy weapons and formed a conventional army. At the Nampula military college, Soviet instructors train tank commanders using Warsaw Pact methods.

Officer cadets go through a seven-year training programme, learn Russian and take holidays on the Black Sea shores, just like their Czech and Bulgarian counterparts. But they are taught neither close combat nor bush survival techniques. The Mozambican Army has tanks and missiles which are useless against the RNM, but not a single helicopter which could be so useful. The USSR is dumping its stocks and refuses to change the nature of its supplies. It demands payment in advance and in dollars for spare parts for MiGs. It all looks as though Moscow is not anxious to give Frelimo the means to achieve a quick victory. Cynics point out that the continuing rebellion, as in Eritrea for example, justifies maintaining a supply line of massive military aid and keeping several hundred Soviet advisers in the country.

The number of military experts from communist countries is estimated to be between 800 and 1,000. As elsewhere in Africa, the East Germans look after the security services. There are also about 200 Cubans. North Koreans, whose numbers are increasing, are said to have agreed to train in their country an initial detachment of 60 men in anti-guerrilla fighting.

To this must be added what the RNM describe an "international

brigades" — 400 Tanzanians and some 3,000 Zimbabweans. The Tanzanians are for the most part training NCOs near Maputo, while Robert Mugabe's men are on the field where they protect the Beira-Mutare oil pipeline, which supplies Zimbabwe and keep an eye on the Maforga pumping station. They also patrol jointly with the Mozambican Army and keep a garrison in Tete.

Captive recipient of insufficient Soviet aid, Mozambique is seeking to broaden its supply sources. It has approached several Western countries — France, Britain and Portugal — as well as Yugoslavia and Brazil for light weapons, munitions and uniforms. Both London and Lisbon appear to be willing to provide ad hoc assistance, but no Nato member can go much further in supporting a Marxist-Leninist government closely linked to the USSR. Portugal had agreed to train 80 Mozambican officers in anti-guerrilla techniques at the Lisbon military college, but the plan was postponed because the selected officers cannot at present be released from the Mozambican Army.

For some time now, the RNM has been polishing up its nationalist legitimacy and claims in its radio broadcasts, which have a fairly wide audience in Mozambique, that it is giving priority to "training cadres so as to avert a political vacuum when the Machel government is overthrown". With this in view, it claims to have organised a meeting of its followers in Geneva early in March, but nothing more was heard of it. The recent mysterious killing of its strongman, Orlando Christina, has probably plunged the rebellion into confusion.

The rebellion is now four years old, but Frelimo still describes RNM fighters as "armed bandits" unworthy of being opponents, while at the same time accusing this "advance guard of the South African Army" of working towards specific political goals in Pretoria's service. There is a contradiction here. Until this is sorted out the two sides brandish slogans. Frelimo's cry of "Independence or death" is answered by the RNM's "Freedom or death". Both sides, however, share one catchphrase — "The fight continues".

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