

AFRICA VIEW

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MNR on the run

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rebels of the anti-Frelimo Mozambique National Resistance Movement (MNR) were predicting a week that they would be in Maputo by the end of 1984.

Earlier this year the MNR said it would celebrate Christmas 1982 in the company of its many wistful exiles still referred to as the "Lorenco Marquês".

The earlier claim was made at a time when the military situation in Mozambique was so bad that there seemed to be a very real possibility that the guerillas would, in fact, be on Polana Hotel prawns over a festive season.

Attacks and ambushes were a regular feature of travel on road and rail links between even major cities, isolated villages were regularly attacked and occupied briefly and attacks on the Beira-Mutare fuel pipeline threatened neighbouring Zimbabwe with economic strangulation.

Maputo-based diplomats said that the security situation was worse than it had ever been.

Several related developments were combined against the MNR to paint a very different picture now.

The turning point in the rebel's fortunes appears to have coincided with a quiet admission by the American State Department that Washington believed the MNR owed its continued existence largely to South African support.

Sources close to the MNR say the movement may fall apart completely after a series of internal disasters.

The first and worst of these was the death of MNR Secretary-General

Orlando Cristino in Pretoria in what appears to be a vicious power struggle.

Then the MNR radio station, "Radio Free Africa" or "The Voice of the Hyena" depending which side you are on, went off the air for the first time since the MNR was established with the help of Rhodesian intelligence several years ago.

Now the two Bomba brothers, Adriano who defected from Mozambique in a MiG jet and the elder Bonaventura, have disappeared and may have been killed too.

Both were key MNR officers.

Relations between Maputo and Washington, which reached their lowest ebb in 1981 when several US diplomats were expelled amid allegations that they were running a CIA spy ring, have improved to the extent that a new US ambassador is to take up residence in Mozambique shortly.

Air raids aside, relations between Maputo and Pretoria appear to have improved to the stage where Mozambique is publicly emphasising that it will not allow the ANC to operate from its territory.

Presumably the quid pro quo in that deal was an end to the support which South Africa says it does not give the MNR and which Maputo insists it does.

The test now is whether the MNR can, as it claims, stand by itself, and continue its war without assistance.

At the height of the MNR military campaign, senior Mozambican officers agreed that the guerillas, playing a game Frelimo appeared to

have forgotten, had swept with comparative ease through the thinly-populated and lightly-defended country to the north.

But, they insisted, the war in the more heavily-populated and better-defended south would be a different story.

The rebels could only be secure there if they could follow Mao's doctrine and "swim like fish" amid the local population.

The rebels were, in fact, then preparing their final offensive through the fertile Limpopo Valley, Mozambique's "breadbasket".

On the ground Frelimo formed militia to defend homes, villages and strategic installations leaving the regular forces free to carry out seek and destroy attacks.

The MNR later resumed its guerilla attacks and opened up a new front from Malawi.

The pipeline attacks continued for a while until a desperate Zimbabwe sent troops across the border to mount an aggressive defence of Harare's economic interests.

An anxious Malawi ordered the MNR to leave its territory and, though the attacks on softer targets have continued, events outside their control appear to have robbed the guerillas of an initiative they never regained.

Maputo certainly does not have the feel about it of a capital under siege.

The sidewalk cafes are operating, albeit as understocked as ever, and crowds are queuing outside the local movie theatres.