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MANICA: turning the tide against banditry

by Fernando Gonçalves

One morning in January 1979, the small town of Machaze, in the central Mozambican province of Manica, awoke to the sound of gunfire. The town was under attack from a group of bandits of the "Mozambique National Resistance" (MNR), operating in those days as an irregular unit in the Rhodesian army of Ian Smith.

The local government building in Machaze was looted, and then part destroyed. A small barracks where a platoon of the Mozambican Armed Forces (FPLM) was stationed came under mortar fire. A nearby shop belonging to a Portuguese businessman was pillaged, and then set on fire.

The importance of this raid is that it was one of the first large scale actions undertaken by the MNR. Casualties were not high: survivors say that no more than ten people died in the attack.

At the home of the local administrator (who happened to be out of town at the time) the bandits showed that they had a sinister sense of humour. They left a note reading: "We would have liked to have lunch with you, but you weren't in when we called. But we will come again tomorrow. Set places for us at lunch".

In fact, the bandits did not come back the following day: but the situation in Machaze was dramatically changed. From a zone of peace, where agricultural production (mainly cashew nuts) was developing satisfactorily, Machaze was transformed into a totally insecure region.

All the shops in the area closed - some, because their owners were killed while driving on the road from the provincial capital, Chimoio, to Machaze, and others because the shopkeepers abandoned Machaze altogether and went to live in Beira where they had other interests.

Now, six years later, the FPLM have the situation in Machaze in hand, and there is even talk of re-establishing the trading network in the area. The

MNR's presence in the area has been reduced, but not eliminated, and it can still be dangerous to travel on the roads, many of which are mined.

The only fully secure way to reach Machaze is by air. Overland, occasional military columns make the journey from Chimoio to Machaze. It takes them four days to cover the 200 kilometres involved (not so long ago, it took two weeks). "Only one vehicle hit a mine and had to be left behind", a driver who works for Mozambique's Natural Disasters Office told us. His convoy had arrived in Machaze on a Sunday, after setting out from Chimoio the previous Thursday. He evidently considered this a victory.

The main strategic objective of the MNR in southern Manica appears to be to hinder road traffic between Chimoio and Machaze. But it no longer has the same grip on the area that it enjoyed four years ago, and the enormous bases that once existed in this part of the country are a thing of the past.

"There are no bandit bases any more", declared Captain Leandro Nota, military commander for southern Manica. "What they have are small camps, and we are planning to eliminate these definitively, not only in Machaze, but in the entire province".

In 1979-80, the largest MNR base in the country was in southern Manica, in the Sitatonga mountains, near the Zimbabwe border. It was from this base that the gang who attacked Machaze in January 1979 came. Dragging heavy artillery over extremely difficult terrain, the FPLM launched an offensive against Sitatonga, known as "Operation Leopard", in mid-1980. In June of that year the base fell, hundreds of peasants were liberated from MNR control, and the surviving bandits fled southwards.

Since Rhodesia had now become Zimbabwe, and the MNR's creators had lost their jobs, the fall of Sitatonga, it was hoped, would be the beginning of the end of banditry in Mozambique. However, the South Africans stepped into the breach left by the collapse of the Smith regime, the MNR acquired new rear bases in the Transvaal, and the 'central base' inside Mozambique was shifted to Garagua, south of Sitatonga, but still in Manica province.

The FPLM closed in on Garagua in late 1981. The final assault was

launched on 7 December: the MNR's "Supreme Chief", Afonso Dhlakama, was hastily flown out by a South African helicopter, a couple of days before the base fell.

The MNR's major operational base for southern Mozambique was then moved across the river Save to Tome in Inhambane province. Nothing of similar size was created again in Manica. Instead, the MNR have operated in smaller groups, out of a large number of small and scattered camps. Painstakingly these are attacked, one by one, yet as long as the bandits are being resupplied new camps will be set up.

Despite the sabotage of the MNR, the economy of Manica is far from paralysed. Manica contains one of Mozambique's most important industrial development projects - IFLOMA (Manica Forestry Industries). With Swedish assistance, an extremely modern sawmill and particle-board factory were built at Messica on the road from Chimoio to the Zimbabwean border. They were finished ahead of time, and never once was the MNR able to attack Messica. Nonetheless, despite the public pledges of continued support given by the Swedish ambassador when the Messica sawmill was formally inaugurated, in April 1983 Sweden pulled out all its technicians from the project. No Swede was ever in any danger at Messica, but "they had been listening to too much foreign propaganda", as the provincial governor, Colonel Manuel Antonio, put it.

The withdrawal of the Swedes gave the IFLOMA management headaches, since there were simply not enough qualified Mozambican workers to guarantee the smooth running of the factory. Thus the MNR and its South African patrons won a temporary victory, not through any military achievement, but by scaring a foreign government thousands of miles away. IFLOMA turned to Mozambique's socialist allies for help, and Czechoslovakia responded. Czech technicians are now working at Messica, ensuring that the complex functions correctly.

One of the factors that has contributed greatly to improving the military situation in the province (and particularly in Machaze) has been the introduction of a system of "local" or "territorial" forces.

Local forces are based on people recruited in their villages who, after a period of military training, return and live in the villages. They function like the regular army, except for the fact that they do not live in barracks for any length of time. They live in their houses, defend their villages, and only go to the military command post in moments of crisis, or where their presence there is ordered.

The measure is very positive from a psychological point of view, since the local forces are acting on the home ground, and defending things that matter dearly to them (their families, homes, fields etc.).

The reliance on territorially-based forces is, to some extent, the result of a rethinking of military strategy, and the incorporation of some of the practices of Frelimo when it was a guerrilla force fighting against the Portuguese army. The Manica Provincial Military Commander, Major-General Tobias Dai, one of the youngest generals in the Mozambican army, is a veteran of the national liberation war. He was appointed provincial commander in 1982 and he is generally held to have played a major role in the improvements achieved in Manica.

After General Dai took command, military operations were decentralised. Previously the forces of the FPLM Third Brigade were concentrated in the city of Chimoio, only going into the bush on specific missions, usually of an emergency nature. But now the brigade has been broken down into several battalions scattered throughout the province, and thus able to act much more effectively against MNR gangs. "Everywhere that we destroy an enemy camp, we put one of our battalions", one Mozambican officer told me.

A concrete example of this process happened in 1983, very near Chimoio itself. Twelve kilometres from the city the MNR had set up a camp in the zone of Matsinho, which was used to make travel on the outskirts of Chimoio difficult. When the FPLM destroyed the camp, they did not abandon the place, but built at Matsinho a Provincial Centre for Politico-Military Training. Where MNR bandits once lurked, the province's local forces now receive their training.