

Zimbabwean forces in Mozambique

ZIMBABWE forces in Mozambique's central province of Manica have carried out a number of operations in recent weeks aimed at beating back the threat of the anti-Frelimo Mozambique National Resistance (MNR) against the forestry complex, Ifloma.

The complex is located at Messica, between the town of Manica and the provincial capital of Chimoi. It includes a saw mill and a panel factory plus a town of about 700 families.

When Swedish technicians were working at Ifloma in 1982, they fled the area when MNR rebels came too close. Some of the re-planting units, like those at Bandula, near Messica, and at Gafumbe, east of Chimoi, have also been rebel targets.

In May, Ifloma vehicles were shot at and two workers died. There are also thousands of hectares of timber stands both north and south of the main highway connecting the Zimbabwe border to the port of Beira. The forests have become increasingly vulnerable to MNR activity. If Mozambique manages to take any more wood out of those areas in the near future, it will probably have to be done through Zimbabwe.

In Manica province, neither government nor Frelimo party officials will say that Zimbabwean forces are carrying out operations in Mozambique. The Ifloma complex is protected by a permanent force of Mozambican soldiers, including artillery units and trained worker-militia.

But locally people talk of a Zimbabwean offensive against an MNR base from which attacks against Ifloma have been launched. Messica is backed by a ridge behind which the base was located. It was apparently once used by ZANU-PF during the struggle for Zimbabwe. On separate occasions both Zimbabwean and Mozambican forces have overrun the rebel hide-out, but the MNR later moved back in.

About six weeks ago the Zimbabweans once more overwhelmed the rebels and this time left behind a contingent to hold the territory.

According to a Zimbabwean army officer, Zimbabwean soldiers have also been operating northwest of Messica, near Mavonde, which is north of Penhalonga where timber

stands supply the sawmill at Messica. Penhalonga will soon be exhausted of usable timber and Ratanda area, southwest of Messica, is supposed to supply the mill for the next 15 to 20 years.

Access to the Ratanda Timber Stands is cut off because of MNR activity and it can only be reached by using a route through Zimbabwe. According to Ifloma workers, it is planned to use the Zimbabwean route to take timber out over the next couple of years.

The operations in the Mavonde area, said to have taken place in a three week period that covered early July, corresponds to other reports of an influx of dead Zimbabwean soldiers into the Mutare morgue. Zimbabwe has also reportedly suffered a number of minor incidents of MNR rebel attacks against food stores on Zimbabwean territory.

The aid that Zimbabwe is now giving Mozambique may end up being very costly, but as Prime Minister Mugabe said in a recent statement, it is in Zimbabwe's interest to help.

Mutare businessman, J Sanhanga, said, "there are plenty of businessmen interested in going into Mozambique and we have quite a lot of commodities here that would interest Mozambicans — toothpaste, soap, but also construction materials like cement, wheelbarrows, irrigation materials. We can supply them at a better price than elsewhere. We want timber. They've got beautiful timbers there and it would be far cheaper for us," he continued. "If something could be done to have the port of Beira open, it would make life easier for this country."

At the moment most imports are coming via South Africa, and the South Africans "are playing delaying tricks," said Sanhanga. "We pay storage charges for no other reason than to make things very expensive," he said.

"Certain PTA (Preferential Trade Area) countries — Seychelles and Burundi for instance — want to buy our pine and stop their trade with South Africa. I have got an order now from the Seychelles. But from Mutare to them, through South Africa, it's going to cost three times more money to ship. We

could do a lot more export business but transport is our biggest killer," he said.

Regarding Zimbabwe-Mozambique trade, Mr Sanhanga said that it is Zimbabwe's Trade and Commerce Ministry that is the barrier.

"They've not been much help," he said, "but Mozambique has been very interested in increasing trade." Sanhanga said he believes that the security situation is what has made the ministry reluctant to facilitate more business between the two countries.

Others are of the opinion that it is a form of trade protectionism. In terms of fruit like oranges, which Zimbabwe also produces, Mozambique would easily be able to under-price Zimbabwe's product.

But there is a vast amount of unofficial trade in vegetables, fruit, special crops like ginger and lychees, plus fish and cattle.

There are a lot of straight business dealings in Zimbabwe by the Ifloma complex which does much of its purchasing in the country. So do aid agencies — like the Red Cross — who have been involved in relief and development work for Manica and Sofala provinces.

David Lameira, the head of Mozambique's Red Cross in Manica Province, said that the general situation in the province is "better than in the past".

The "grave problems" of hunger in all districts have eased off somewhat but recent reports from the town of Machaze in Southern Manica indicate that orphaned children are once again at risk.

The military situation is still serious enough that the area can only be reached by airplane and the craft used by the Red Cross league has been withdrawn. The children are being cared for by local families, Lameira said, but "it's not enough. Food production was good but not sufficient for everyone because seeds arrived late and in small quantities."

All along the border of Manica province, Mozambique relief workers are using Zimbabwean routes to get to areas otherwise inaccessible because of the war. □

Reported by Lois Browne