

Rebels routed

By KEN POTTINGER in Lisbon

A MAJOR combined offensive by Mozambicans and Zimbabwean troops in the centre of the country has dealt a crippling blow to Right-wing rebels in the former Portuguese colony.

The offensive is reported to have stiffened the morale of the war-plagued Marxist regime.

More than 5,000 troops, some of them airborne, have been flushing out guerrillas for the past two weeks from their main bases in the Central Sofala and Manhica Provinces according to news-agency reports here.

Diplomatic sources said the offensive had destroyed at least four guerrilla bases including the main encampment, left hundreds of rebels dead and destroyed arms and ammunition.

Under strain

The rebel leader, Aronso Dhikama, and his closest collaborators had escaped but Government troops are said to be in hot pursuit.

A rebel spokesman in Lisbon, Senhor Jorge Correia, revealed last weekend that Renamo, the rebel group, had released all its 13 hostages, among them two

Britons, captured at various times over the past year, but continued to hold two Soviet hostages.

Senhor Correia claimed the offensive had been repelled and said it would be President Machel's last military operation. "We will take his capital before the end of the year," he said.

Diplomats in Lisbon said there was little doubt the rebels had received a severe setback and gave little credence to their chances of continuing the seven year war successfully.

The fact that they had suddenly released all hostages indicated they were under great strain and needed to move without encumbrance, said one diplomatic source.

President Machel, announcing the success of his offensive, said: "We have broken the back of the snake but we won't rest until his head has been crushed."

As one senior Government official here noted, the President's problem is the hydra-headed nature of his snake.

"The war is only one aspect of his problem," the official said. "He needs to win the battle against poverty, hunger, inefficiency and under-development before he can really declare victory."