

MOZAMBIQUE

MNR strongholds captured AED

The joint Mozambique-Zimbabwe offensive against Mozambique National Resistance (MNR) rebels has been extended from the central provinces of Sofala, Manica and Zambezia to a "second front" in Maputo province in the south, government and military officials in Maputo confirmed on 11 September.

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The joint offensive, aimed at finally destroying the rebels, began on 1 July, according to Maputo radio reports. However, the participation of Zimbabwe troops in active combat in Mozambique — rather than their previous defensive duties on road, rail and pipeline links to Malawi and Beira port — was only officially acknowledged by the two governments on 7 September, during the announcement of the capture of the MNR's 'Casa Banana' headquarters in the foothills of Gorongosa mountain, northern Sofala province.

Casa Banana was captured in a five-hour battle on 28 August in which Mozambican infantry were supported by an estimated 2,500 Zimbabwean paratroopers (AED 7:9:85). The supplies and weapons captured were sufficient to keep the rebels — estimated in 1984 to number about 2,000 — going for at least three years, Mozambican military authorities say.

MNR commander Afonso Dlakama is reported to have escaped to northern Sofala province. Since the Casa Banana attack, the military authorities have claimed the capture of a number of major bases in the Gorongosa national park area and in Sofala and Manica provinces. However, an attack on the MNR's main training camp, at Gogogo in Gorongosa park, was reported still to be in progress on 10 September, with the rebels supported by UK, US, Israeli, West German and Portuguese mercenaries, military officials say. They claim over 500 rebels have been killed in the attacks, with a further 100 killed in successful attacks on camps in Manhica and Magude districts in Maputo province since the second front was launched in late August.

Despite recent successes, Mozambican military and officials warn that the offensive will continue for several months. This was echoed by President Machel, during a visit to Casa Banana on 6 September. "We have broken the back of the snake, but the tail will still wag for a while."

Zimbabwe has kept a very low profile about its involvement in the offensive, with the only official statement made by Prime Minister Robert Mugabe on 7 September. "We have a duty to go to the rescue of Mozambique when (it) is in trouble," he told a press conference, adding "we decided rather than merely wait to be attacked by the MNR we would go on the offensive and with Mozambique try and eliminate the bandits."

The size of the Zimbabwe force in Mozambique has not been publicised, but local observers estimated that up to 10,000 troops are now involved, compared with the 3,400 who have been guarding the pipeline, road and rail routes since 1982. In part, observers say, Zimbabwe's decision to increase its involvement is a response to requests for assistance made by Machel earlier this year. It is also indicative, however, of growing concern in Harare about the possibility of South Africa imposing trade and other sanctions against its neighbours (AED 7:9:85, page 6). Because of MNR activity the routes through Beira at present account for only 10 per cent of Zimbabwe's trade — with the rest going through South Africa — but would be vital for Zimbabwe's survival if the republic took reprisal sanctions. In August Mugabe told parliament that "whatever it costs us to safeguard those routes is money well spent."