

# Mozambique's skilful rebels escape net

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*Observer*

MILITARY experts are becoming increasingly concerned that a costly campaign by the Zimbabwe armed forces in central Mozambique to wipe out guerrillas fighting the government of President Samora Machel may turn into a fruitless exercise.

The lack of back-up from the Mozambican forces, the inability of the Government to restore administration in the area quickly, the mobility and surprising sophistication of the guerrillas of the Mozambique National Resistance, and the failure to locate the MNR's sources of supply, have led experts here to believe the enemy has decided on prudent withdrawal.

The MNR forces are said to be fully capable of withdrawing from the combat area until the Zimbabweans finish their tour of duty in Mozambique, now expected to end in November.

The campaign has entered its third month. Since the Zimbabwe national elections ended early in July, the Zimbabwe Army and Air Force have been steadily building up men and supplies around Chimoi airfield, a few miles from the eastern Zimbabwe city of Mutare.

The original strategy drawn up by the Zimbabwe National Army's headquarters was to establish a broad corridor on either side of the 125-mile railway line running directly east from Mutare to the port of Beira.

The corridor was envisaged then as an extension of a defensive operation begun in about October 1982, where up

to 2,000 Zimbabwean troops protected the railway line and the nearby pipeline which carries all but a small proportion of Zimbabwe's fuel needs.

The Zimbabwean strength is now about 7,000. Military analysts believe that the Army will not be able to spare more than about 15,000, as it is already deeply involved with a new threat from dissident guerrillas in the country's western provinces.

The Manica and Sofala provinces of central Mozambique, where the Zimbabwean operations are to be confined, consist of alternately mountainous and marshy terrain with none of the comparatively well-developed good roads and communication facilities the Zimbabweans are accustomed to at home.

A campaign not only to push back the guerrillas but to hold on to positions over a wide area of inhospitable country, keeping men constantly re-supplied, is regarded as too costly, and beyond the manpower resources of the 41,000-strong Army.

The Army has discovered that the MNR is unwilling to defend its positions. Casa Banana, the MNR national headquarters in the centre of Gorongosa National Park, some 50 miles north-west of Beira, was deserted when the Zimbabweans burst in.

In the smouldering communications centre, destroyed by retreating MNR officers, pamphlets printed on a duplicating machine lay around, reading: 'Welcome ZNA.' The element of surprise had been lost, as indicated by the low MNR casualties, put at under 50.