

The fall of Casa Banana



President Samora Machel with Zimbabwean and Mozambican officers examining equipment at the MNR headquarters

"MARXIST-LENINIST forces of Zimbabwe!" cried the leaflet. "We guarantee that you will never return to your country because you will all be killed and captured by our forces."

The leaflet, written on one side in Portuguese and the other in English, lay on the ground in the ruins of what had once been the general headquarters of the South African backed "Mozambique National Resistance" (MNR). There were hundreds of copies of the leaflet scattered all over the base: apparently the MNR had not been able to distribute them before the Mozambican and Zimbabwean armed forces had overwhelmed the headquarters.

The boastful leaflet is dated 25 August. Three days later, on the 28th, Zimbabwean troops, far from being "all dead and captured", were in full control of a base which the MNR had considered impregnable.

The headquarters, known by the MNR as "Casa Banana", nestles in the foothills of Gorongosa Mountain, an impressive massif thrusting over 1 800 metres above sea level over the plains of the central province of Sofala. Dotted all over the northern parts of Sofala and of the neighbouring province of Manica are a string of other MNR camps and bases, some of which guarded the approaches to Casa Banana. From Casa Banana a powerful communications centre coordinated the actions of MNR units all over the country, and kept in contact with rear bases in Transvaal (and perhaps also in Malawi).

Zimbabwean troops have been in Mozambique since November 1982. Up until this year they have played a largely defensive role, guarding installations that

are vital to Zimbabwe's own economy, such as the oil pipeline from Beira to Mutare.

But at a meeting between Presidents Samora Machel of Mozambique and Julius Nyerere of Tanzania and Prime Minister Robert Mugabe in Harare on 12 June, it was decided that the Zimbabwean forces would, together with the Mozambican army (FPLM), mount a major offensive against the MNR in the centre of the country.

The Mozambican/Zimbabwean offensive began in early July, and one by one MNR strongholds were overrun, as the allied forces began to encircle Gorongosa.

On 9 August the MNR were driven out of the locality of Mavonde in Manica, a few

Joint Mozambique-Zimbabwe military operations against MNR bandits are beginning to bear fruit. Paul Fauvet recently visited Casa Banana headquarters of the MNR in Mozambique which was captured by government forces.

kilometres from the Zimbabwean border. On 20 August Mozambican and Zimbabwean troops seized the MNR's "central regional base" at Muxamba, south of the Manica provincial capital, Chimoio. From this base, MNR units sabotaged the Beira-Zimbabwe pipeline, and the electricity transmission lines serving Beira.

On 23 August, the small town of Maringue, north of Gorongosa, was retaken by Mozambican troops after several months in the hands of the MNR. Maringue has changed hands several times in the course of the war.

The final assault on Casa Banana was

carried out with deadly precision on the morning of 28 August. At 5.00 a.m. planes and helicopters of the Mozambican and Zimbabwean armed forces began an intensive bombardment. The MNR replied with anti-aircraft fire, but were unable to bring down any of the attacking aircraft.

Once the bombing had stopped, a small force of Zimbabwean paratroops (85 men in all, according to the Mozambican weekly magazine *Tempo*) was dropped. Panicked groups of MNR were now pouring out of Casa Banana in all directions. The paratroops gunned them down. No exact figure on MNR casualties is available, but the Zimbabwean paratroop officers with whom I spoke insisted that they had killed "hundreds".

As for Zimbabwean casualties, these were minimal. Sources in Chimoio spoke of two paratroopers dead, and four wounded. In short, the operation was a stunning success. The whole base was under allied control by 10.00 a.m. The battle had lasted five hours.

At Casa Banana, the weaponry captured by the Mozambican and Zimbabwean forces was enough to have supplied the MNR for two to three years. Large cabins had been built to serve as arsenals, and inside shelves were laden down with mortar shells, grenades, mines and munitions of various kinds. About 500 rifles and machine guns were captured, as well as several pieces of heavy artillery.

A propaganda unit functioned in the base with at least a dozen typewriters, three duplicators and ample supplies of stencils and duplicating ink. All over the base are examples of the work of this unit: crude cartoons attacking President Machel, arrogant claims to MNR military might, and appeals to Mozambican troops to desert.

A short distance from the main Casa Banana complex is a well-kept airstrip, some 800 metres long. It was here that South African planes and helicopters landed regularly to bring in supplies and reinforcements to the MNR. The Nkomati non-aggression accord signed between Mozambique and South Africa in March 1984 made little or no difference to this.

The last South African visitor here was Deputy Foreign Minister Louis Nel. He arrived on 19 August, apparently to warn the MNR "Supreme Commander" Afonso Dhlakama that his position was hopeless, and maybe to evacuate any South African personnel at the base. Nel's other pressing interest was to ensure that incriminating documentation on South African violations of the Nkomati Accord was destroyed. In this he was not altogether successful, for the Mozambican authorities claim that "extremely important" documentation was captured at Casa Banana. However, Dhlakama's personal archives seem to have been destroyed, for a large pile of ashes was found in an oven near the house in which he lived. □