

The fall of Casa Banana

"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 rising 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).

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

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.

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 mortal shells, grenades, mines and munitions of various kinds. About 500 rifles and machine guns were captured, as well as several pieces of heavy artillery.