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Patti Waldmeir recently in Maputo reports on the disruption caused to neighbouring countries Costly stalemate in Mozambique's guerrilla war

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SURVEYING THE scene last August of his Government's most significant military victory yet against South African-backed rebels of the Mozambique National Resistance (Renamo), President Samora Machel of Mozambique tempered the general euphoria with a note of caution.

"We have broken the back of the snake. The tail will still thrash around for a while."

Rebel attacks would not end immediately, he implied, despite the fact that Mozambique and Zimbabwe troops had succeeded in capturing the guerrillas' headquarters, known as Casa Banana, in the Gorongosa game reserve, central Mozambique.

It seemed that a decisive point had been reached in a guerrilla war which has lasted nearly 10 years, and which has far reaching regional implications.

Aside from the strains it places on the Mozambique Government itself, the war has a profound impact on neighbouring Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi, all seeking to end their dependence on South Africa's ports for their trade by using the closer—and cheaper—Mozambican outlets.

For Zimbabwe, the war poses a further threat. On several occasions in the past its vital oil pipeline running along the so-called Beira corridor, with road and rail links to Zim-

babwe, has been sabotaged by rebels, forcing Harare to deploy up to 10,000 troops in Mozambique.

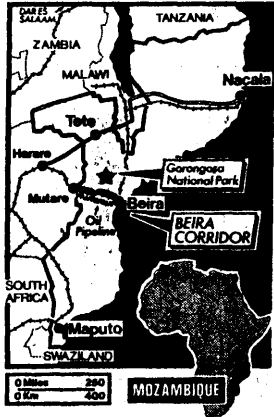
But President Machel's optimism seems to have been misplaced.

In the eight months since then, Casa Banana has changed hands two more times—the ill equipped and demoralised Mozambique army lost the base again to Renamo in February, but there have been recent reports that it has been recaptured—and the ebb and flow of guerrilla activity throughout the country continues.

Mozambican officials are maintaining a somewhat hollow insistence that they will settle for nothing short of a military victory over Renamo; a negotiated settlement is ruled out, at least officially. But few observers in Maputo appear to believe that Renamo is headed for a military defeat.

Neither are the rebels about to march on the capital, however. From Maputo, the possibility of a Renamo takeover looks remote. Even Pretoria, which continues to deny that it is aiding the rebels, despite evidence to the contrary, does not appear to consider Renamo a credible alternative to Marxist President Machel.

Under the circumstances, it is not surprising that rumours have begun to fly in Maputo of the possible resumption of peace talks between the Frelimo government and Renamo, perhaps with Mr.



Mozambique right-wing rebels said yesterday they had seized two north-eastern ports and a rural town and killed 97 Mozambican and 46 Zimbabwean troops this month, Reuter reports from Lisbon.

The Mozambican National Resistance (Renamo) said its forces occupied the port of Pebane in north-eastern Zambezia province and the town of Mucubela on May 1. The next day they seized the nearby port of Bajone, Renamo said.

There was no independent confirmation of the captures and western diplomats say they believe the casualty figures are exaggerated.

Mugabe, the Zimbabwe Prime Minister, as intermediary. Mr Mugabe has denied that he is acting as a go-between.

But the pressure is clearly on the Zimbabwe Prime Minister to resolve the Mozambique conflict which has severely disrupted his landlocked country's two main transport routes to Indian Ocean ports.

At times last year, up to a quarter of the 40,000-strong Zimbabwe army was committed to keeping one of these routes open in the face of guerrilla attacks. As many as 10,000 troops were deployed in the central Mozambican provinces of Sofala and Manica to pro-

tect the Beira Corridor in eastern Zimbabwe and the Mozambican port of Beira, as well as in the north-western province of Tete, which carries a road link with Malawi. The cost of the operation has been put at around Zim\$ 1m (£400,000) a day.

When Renamo succeeded in recapturing the Casa Banana base in February from Mozambican troops left to defend the headquarters, Mr Mugabe's government was prompted to rethink its military commitment to Mr Machel, and the Zimbabwe troop presence is understood to have been reduced to about 5,000.

Withdrawal is not an option, however, were the Beira corridor to close, Zimbabwe would be forced to depend on South African ports for all its imports and exports. And Mr Mugabe appears unwilling to tell Frelimo, which suffered acute distress because of their support for him during Zimbabwe's independence war, that he will no longer continue the fight on their behalf.

But the high cost of the exercise puts mounting pressure on Mr Mugabe to encourage a negotiated solution. Talks between the two sides were last held in 1984, in the wake of the Nkomati non-aggression pact between Mozambique and South Africa under which both sides were to have halted support for guerrillas fighting to overthrow each others' governments.

A successful conclusion to the 1984 talks which were held with Pretoria as a mediator, would have meant a major foreign policy coup for the Republic. In the event, the talks broke down.

Subsequently, the Nkomati accord has become a dead letter. While Maputo has complied by expelling the African National Congress (ANC), diplomats in Maputo believe that South Africa continues to back Renamo. (Frelimo has produced what they say, and most diplomats believe, are the diaries of a Renamo field commander seized at Casa Banana last August, which show that

the rebels continued to receive supplies, training and transport from the South African military).

The economic benefits hoped for under the accord have also failed to materialise. Trade with South Africa is actually on the decline, according to South African officials, and few private investors from the Republic have been willing to brave the security risks.

The war has become a major burden on a country, already badly hit by three years of drought between 1982 and 1985 and poor economic management. Despite recent economic reforms, the decline is unlikely to be halted until the war, which has pushed up defence spending to 42 per cent of total government expenditure, ends.

Negotiations with Renamo would not necessarily achieve this, as it is unclear whether rebel leaders have full control over their supporters. Many diplomats in Maputo see no lasting solution to the problem until the crisis south of the Limpopo River (Mozambique's border with South Africa) has been resolved.

Until then, the South African military, many observers believe, is likely to regard a stable Mozambique as undesirable, for Maputo might well have the confidence to provide a rear base for guerrillas seeking Pretoria's overthrow.