

Private sector footing bill for Frelimo unit?

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PRIVATE-SECTOR companies operating in Mozambique are believed to have picked up the Frelimo government's R5m arms-and-expertise tab to defend the key Nacala rail link against further attacks by Renamo guerrillas.

SA defence experts are openly sceptical that the British government's go-ahead for UK firm Hall & Watts to arm and train by January a 600-strong force of Mozambican soldiers will defuse Renamo activity in the area.

While news of the deal caught British government officials in SA unawares yesterday, a spokesman for the British Embassy in Pretoria indicated Whitehall did not bankroll arms sales to Frelimo.

British-based multinational Lonrho is widely seen as the main backer for securing the Nacala rail link between Malawi and northern Mozambique — but it was not possible to confirm this yesterday.

Lonrho is already pumping £3.8m into the repair of the line in tandem with a British government SADC grant of £2.6m.

In its last financial review, Lonrho Sugar Corporation noted that its Malawi operations continued to be seriously affected by security problems in Mozambique.

"With the closure of the Nacala line

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in December 1984, there is no longer any direct railway link to the ports," shareholders were told.

Three months ago, Lonrho chairman Tiny Rowlands rejected a Renamo offer to negotiate the security of the company's interests in Mozambique.

Contacted yesterday, Lonrho (SA) MD Terence Wilkinson said he was unable to comment as company officials in London declined to answer repeated calls.

A spokesman for Hall & Watts made clear the company had no investments in Mozambique nor links with Lonrho outside operating in similar markets.

Africa Institute director Erich Leistner said low morale within Frelimo's ranks was too deep-rooted to effectively turn the tables on Renamo in the area.

"I don't see much prospect for the success of the exercise," he said.

This was echoed by Willem Booyen, a researcher at the University of Pretoria's Institute for Strategic Studies, who thought it unlikely Frelimo troops operating in a rebel stronghold could be properly trained by early next year.

But a US source, familiar with the area, said he believed 600 well-armed men "could make a big difference in nailing down security along the rail".