

And if the rebels DID win they wouldn't know what to do

Gerald L'Ange of the Africa News Service reports on the situation inside Mozambique

THE war in Mozambique has taken on a dramatically different character with the capture by the MNR rebels of five towns and a key bridge over the Zambezi River.

The taking of the towns represents a radical departure from the classical hit-and-run guerilla tactics used by the MNR up to now.

If the rebels hold the town of Mutarara, which commands one of only two bridges over the river, they will be in a position to cut much of the traffic between northern and southern Mozambique.

The only other bridge over the river, which bisects the country, is to the northwest at Tete. But even road traffic crossing at Tete has to double back to Mutarara or go through Malawi to reach northern Mozambique.

If the rebels can hold the other towns they will enormously increase their ability to force the Frelimo Government to accept their demand for negotiations aimed at a political solution to the war.

Few if any reputable analysts believe there can be a military solution without outside intervention, and that appears unlikely.

Mozambique, in effect, is being destroyed by a war nobody can win.

The Frelimo government has proved itself unable to defeat the rebels, who have progressively strengthened their position until they now deny the government effective control of as much as two-thirds of Mozambique.

By all accounts Frelimo's army, the FPLM, is poorly trained and equipped, badly paid and largely demoralised. The MNR's successes are ascribed not so much to its own strength as to the FPLM's weakness.

If the Frelimo government were ousted it would very likely go back to the bush and fight the kind of guerilla war it waged against the Portuguese. And this time it might be even more effective, for it would probably have safe bases in Zimbabwe.

The rebels, however, are considered incapable of forming a viable government even if they were able to topple Frelimo. They have shown no ability to seize and hold large areas and administer them.

Until their capture last December of Caia, another town further down the Zambezi from Mutarara, they had never made a se-

rious attempt to occupy an urban centre.

Much will now depend on whether they can hold the towns they now occupy.

Frelimo's chances of getting outside assistance from Cuba, the Soviet Union or any other of its Communist allies are considered poor. It was because they had declined to come to his rescue against the South African-backed MNR that President Machel was obliged to sign the Nkomati Accord.

Expert analysts believe he hoped the signing of the accord would end the war by cutting off the MNR's South African support. When these hopes were dashed and the MNR grew even stronger, President Machel was left out on a limb.

He accused South Africa of continuing to supply them in violation of the accord, but the rebels said they could capture all the arms they needed from government troops.

Subsequently the African National Congress stepped up insurgent attacks in South Africa and Pretoria claimed these were again being launched from Mozambique in contravention of the accord.

It is not clear whether President Machel has permitted a resumption of these attacks from his country in an attempt to force Pretoria to stop its alleged aid for the MNR.

But the harsh South African response — stopping the recruitment of migrant workers in Mozambique and threatening to attack again ANC targets across the border — has left Frelimo in an even worse position than before, for Mozambi-

que relies heavily on income from the migrant workers.

The rebel forces that captured the central towns almost certainly came from Malawi, where Frelimo claims they had bases. They were apparently ejected by Malawi after Frontline States threatened to close its landlocked borders if it didn't.

Whether the lack of Malawian bases will make the rebels less effective remains to be seen. But past performance indicates the Frelimo forces will be unable to take advantage of the situation on their own.

Mozambican and Zimbabwean defence chiefs met this week to discuss improving joint security. Zimbabwe has committed several thousand troops to the defence of the Beira corridor along which run its rail and pipeline links to the sea.

It is also guarding convoys running through Mozambique's Tete province between Malawi and Zimbabwe.

But there has been no strong indication that Zimbabwe is willing to get dragged into a probably unwinnable guerilla war.

Continued military advances by the MNR and continued setbacks for Frelimo must increase the prospects of a negotiated compromise between them, but analysts do not rule out the possibility of the war simply going on and dragging Mozambique even deeper into ruin.