

Winning the War Against All Odds



HOLGER JENSEN / INSIGHT

Renamo guerrillas are using Soviet arms to beat back Soviet-bloc forces.

SUMMARY: Renamo guerrilla forces in Mozambique appear to be winning the war with the Marxist Frelimo government despite the fact that South Africa no longer gives them aid and the United States has given Frelimo \$70 million since October 1985. The rebels are making gains with Soviet-bloc weapons captured from the other side, and now the Soviets are in danger of losing one of their client states.

Anticomunist guerrillas in Mozambique think nothing of walking eight days through the African bush to engage their enemy in a 30-second firefight. Most have no shoes. Few even have shirts. But they are well-armed with Soviet-bloc weapons captured from the other side — and they appear to be winning.

What makes it all the more astonishing is that they are doing it alone, without any help from their former South African allies or the West. The arms, the ammunition, the canned food, medical supplies and make-shift uniforms worn by the guerrillas all have been seized from the ruling Front for the Liberation of Mozambique, or Frelimo.

Despite their haphazard appearance, the insurgents of the Mozambique National Resistance Movement, or Renamo, are a disciplined military force, on good terms with the civilian population and firmly in control of the countryside. Some of their bases are only a few miles from government-held towns, and they possess a vast arsenal of AK-47 assault rifles, mortars, rocket-propelled grenades, 14.5mm anti-aircraft guns and even SAM-7 missiles.

The war, such as it is, is being fought only on the outskirts of a few major towns still in government hands and along the

Beira corridor, the strategic supply route that links landlocked Zimbabwe to the Indian Ocean. Because the corridor lessens Zimbabwe's dependence on South African trade routes, making it less vulnerable to Pretoria's reprisals against sanctions, Mozambique — and much of the rest of the world — sees Renamo attacks on the corridor as being planned and assisted by South African commandos.

More recently, after the embarrassing loss of five towns near the Malawi border (which fell in battles ranging from 30 seconds to 20 minutes) the Mozambican government accused Malawi of providing bases for the guerrillas.

But Mozambican insurgents have no external bases. Renamo leader Afonso Dlakama does not even have radio contact with the outside world. And he claims he has not had South African help since Pretoria and Maputo in 1984 signed the Nkomati Accord, under which both countries agreed not to aid guerrillas opposing the governments.

Now 10 years old, the bush war in Mozambique is the most successful and least recognized anticommunist insurgency in the world. It is the only battlefield where Soviet-bloc forces have suffered such major reversals that Moscow is in imminent dan-

ger of losing one of its client states. Dlakama confidently predicts victory before the end of this year. "The war is nearly over," he says from his jungle base camp in Gorongosa National Park. "We have already begun the task of reconstruction."

If so, he has succeeded against staggering odds. Renamo has only 22,000 armed guerrillas and 4,500 unarmed recruits. Arrayed against them, by Dlakama's count, are 25,000 Frelimo soldiers and as many as 53,500 reinforcements from seven foreign armies, including 25,000 Zimbabweans, 10,000 Tanzanians and 6,500 Ethiopians. In addition, he estimates there are 12,000 Soviet, East German, Cuban and North Korean advisers, artillery officers, pilots and naval personnel — many participating directly in combat — aiding the dictatorial Marxist government in Maputo.

Despite total air superiority, Frelimo and its allies are virtually under siege in the capital — and in a few provincial towns and isolated military garrisons. Renamo has free run of all 10 provinces in Mozambique, enjoys a monopoly on the nation's food supply and the allegiance of most of the 15 million people. In fact, it has already established a civilian government that administers schools, medical clinics and agricultural programs in the liberated zone.

It seems the only thing the guerrillas cannot do is hold on to large population centers. The problem is that these provide fixed targets for enemy MiGs and Hind helicopter gunships. But they seem able to take towns at will, stripping them of supplies and then abandoning them to the ever-encroaching bush.

While the Reagan Doctrine has produced concrete assistance to other guerrilla armies fighting communist governments, the United States is actually underwriting the other side in Mozambique — by providing aid to the Frelimo government. Washington has given Maputo \$70 million since October 1985 and plans to donate another \$25 million this year. It is also eyeing an ambitious development plan for the Beira corridor. Now under study at the World Bank, the plan envisions an expenditure of \$600 million over the next 10 years.

If Renamo stops attacking the corridor long enough for the project to get off the ground, it will directly benefit the Marxist — and virulently anti-American — government of Zimbabwe's Prime Minister Robert Mugabe, which will have a more direct trade route to the Indian Ocean. For this reason, some U.S. aid planners favor an alternative project at the seaport of Nacala, which has a rail link to friendly, pro-



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Dlakama talks with his commanders from a base camp near Gorongosa Park.

Western Malawi. The only flaw is that Nacala is a Soviet naval base with a large contingent of Tanzanian troops and Cuban advisers.

The United States is not the only Western country assisting Mozambique. The Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands, Portugal, France and Britain also are prospective investors in the Beira corridor. This aid enables the Soviet bloc to concentrate on military assistance to Frelimo. And even Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government is thinking of sending British Special Air Services instructors to train Frelimo special forces.

Dlakama says the West has been hoodwinked by Maputo's propaganda, which characterizes Renamo as ragtag bandits with unsavory links to white colonial regimes. But he concedes that he is partly at fault for not launching a diplomatic offensive abroad. It was only recently that Renamo opened its Mozambique Information Office in Washington, and communications with it are still sporadic.

That will change, Dlakama says. "It is time for the world to learn the truth about Mozambique. Portuguese colonialism has been replaced by Soviet colonialism. We have been invaded by foreign troops. By giving assistance to the Maputo government, the United States and other Western nations are actually paying for Soviet expansion in southern Africa."

By Frelimo's own admission, the war has cost \$4 billion, displaced a million people and resulted in at least 100,000 casualties — hardly the work of bandits. But in a recent news conference, President Joaquim Alberto Chissano boasted that "Mozambique and the West are continuing to speak of the need to support Mozambique militarily. We are deepening our relationship with the United States, Britain, Italy, Germany and Brazil. We hope soon to see the results of this work."

Although the Nkomati Accord has all but collapsed in the wake of the death of

Mozambique's President Samora Moises Machel in a plane crash Oct. 19 and Maputo's continued support of the outlawed African National Congress, Dlakama does not envision another alliance with Pretoria. "They are benefiting from our operations in the Beira corridor," he says, "but they are still providing aid and technical assistance to our enemies in Maputo. So our interests do not always coincide."

Because of Renamo's isolation and lack of external support, it is not easy to visit Dlakama. The route requires crossing a river by dugout canoe and includes several hours of hiking through the bush before reaching Renamo's nearest outpost. The few roads in the Mozambican hinterland have long ago become overgrown with foliage because of disuse; travel usually involves small motorcycles traversing tortuous footpaths for miles on end. It takes six hours to ride from a rebel outpost to Renamo headquarters in Zambezia province.

The provincial headquarters is actually a vast complex of camps, sprawling over several square miles and cleverly concealed in a thick forest of *msasa* trees. There are huge piles of Soviet-bloc weapons, captured in a recent offensive; serious-looking squads of guerrillas training with mortars, rocket-propelled grenades and anti-aircraft machine guns; and mechanics working on a large motor pool of Japanese-made trail bikes.

There are also unarmed recruits, many of them Frelimo prisoners, busily sweeping the ground between a neat series of bamboo barracks.

Most of the guerrillas are 17 to 27 years old, many dressed in rags and without shoes. Their officers sport two or three watches — the spoils of war — and are well turned out in a mixture of camouflage fatigues and civilian clothes.

At the headquarters, Gen. Kalistu, a former schoolteacher and now the commander of all 5,000 Renamo guerrillas in Zambezia, is still celebrating a successful assault he recently led on the town of Milange, forcing the Frelimo defenders to flee into neighboring Malawi after a 20-minute battle.

It seems he has been trying to drink his way through the town's entire stock of Carlsberg beer, or sometimes he drinks gallons of *uchema*, a milky-looking palm wine brewed with an unappealing mixture of dead beetles and other insects. Unmistakably drunk, he falls off a 12-foot platform while showing off his combat assault course and has to be carried to his quarters.



Guerrillas have established civilian local government that administers schools.

But his men maintain ramrod discipline.

A rare treat at mealtime is a can of sardines, Soviet supplies captured from Milange. But the cans are all labeled in Russian "Do not eat after 1980."

Throughout the countryside are grim reminders of the war: the gutted remains of a government convoy ambushed by Renamo, skulls grinning wickedly in the sun; a ruined cathedral, defaced with Frelimo graffiti; the ghost town of Murambala, captured last year and since abandoned. White prisoners, sunburned, with matted hair and heavy beards, are seen occasionally, but conversation with them is forbidden and their identities remain a mystery.

Along the Zambezi River the bush gives way to mango groves, cattle, goats, chickens and well-tended fields of manioc and maize. Maputo claims there has been mass starvation in the liberated zone, but the inhabitants look happy and well-fed.

Also, unlike other African wars in which the sight of armed men, no matter what side, usually sends the civilian populace fleeing, the villagers appear to be on good terms with Renamo. Everywhere the rebels are greeted with smiles, mangoes, bananas, sugar cane and drinks of water. The war, one villager laughs, "is far away. This is the liberated zone. Frelimo is too scared to come here."

The Zambezi forms the boundary between Zambezia and Sofala provinces. On one bank is a giant electric graveyard of transformers and wiring that used to relay power from the Cabora Bassa Dam. It is now idle. On the other side is the district capital of Caia, complete with airport, which was captured by Renamo in 1985. It is now a ghost town.

It takes an hour to cross the river in an overloaded pontoon raft. Even though it is daylight, the guerrilla escorts say there is no danger of air attack. Only an occasional Frelimo transport plane is seen high above.

Approaching Dlakama's own headquarters in Gorongosa National Park, a guerrilla on a motorcycle raises a hand in silent greeting, then leads the way to a small grass hut deep in the forest. Dlakama is inside.

Short, stocky and wearing thick glasses, the 33-year-old leader was born in Sofala province and mission-educated while Mozambique was still a Portuguese colony. He studied for two years to become a priest. Then, in 1970, his name appeared on a list of Portuguese army conscripts, and he found himself fighting Frelimo guerrillas.

In 1973 he deserted the colonial army and joined Frelimo. "I turned my gun against the Portuguese because I wanted



independence. I am a nationalist," he says.

Shortly before independence in 1975, when Portugal abandoned its African colonies and Frelimo had already become a transitional government, Dlakama was one of the young people selected by Machel to serve in the new regime. He was posted in Beira to coordinate supplies for Machel's allies — black guerrillas then fighting an independence war of their own in neighboring Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe.

But he became disenchanted with Machel's Marxist drift: "I was not happy with the system established by Frelimo and decided to turn on them." He saw many of his Frelimo friends executed or imprisoned for questioning the new government's disastrous economic policies and its growing reliance on the Soviet Union.

In 1977 Dlakama joined a group of Frelimo renegades, led by Andre Matsangaise, who had holed up in Gorongosa National Park. They called themselves Renamo and began raiding Frelimo concentration camps to free other dissidents. Dlakama became deputy commander and assumed leadership of the movement when Matsangaise was killed on a military

operation in 1979. By then Renamo was already receiving foreign assistance, first from the white Rhodesian government and, after Zimbabwe's independence in 1980, from South Africa.

But Pretoria pulled the rug out from under Renamo in 1984 by signing the Nkomati Accord. "Our morale was shattered," Dlakama recalls. "My men said we couldn't win. But I told them to trust me. . . . We staged a general offensive, captured huge stocks of enemy weapons and started taking territory."

Dlakama is under no illusions. He concedes that he has been lax in winning recognition for Renamo abroad: "Perhaps, if we had launched our diplomatic offensive earlier, we would have had Stinger missiles by now." But he is convinced Renamo has the initiative and victory is within its grasp.

"Frelimo is in chaos," he says. "Many Frelimo generals have contacted me to ask if it is all right to overthrow the government. We can take Maputo within five or six months. If the West would stop supporting Maputo, the government would fall in two months."

— Holger Jensen in Mozambique