

MNR switches attention to the south

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ALL indications are that the South African backed rebels of the Mozambique National Resistance (MNR Renamo) are switching the main focus of their activities from the centre of the country to the south, reports a correspondent in Maputo.

Military and civilian sources alike report substantial MNR infiltration by land and by sea into the southern three provinces of Maputo, Gaza and Inhambane since April.

Gaza appears to be the worst affected province. According to the armed forces radio programme "Voz de Combate", there are now an estimated 1,500 rebels active in Gaza, two thirds of whom entered the province in the last three months.

The main infiltration routes are overland, across Gaza's lengthy border with the South African province of the Transvaal, but there have also been landings by boat on the Gaza coast. The small Mozambican navy is quite unable to patrol the entire 2,500 kilometres of the country's coastline.

Gaza is a significant food producing area. Although drought still grips much of the province, the Limpopo river provides sufficient water for massive irrigation schemes around the town of Chokwe. State farms and private plots here provide substantial quantities of food

for Maputo. One clear strategic objective for the MNR is to cut the road between the capital and the Limpopo valley.

Another is to prevent the reopening of the Limpopo railway line. This runs for over 500 kilometres from southern Zimbabwe through the middle of Gaza and on to the port of Maputo. It has been closed to international traffic since 1984, largely due to MNR attacks.

But rehabilitation of the track is underway, and the Zimbabwean authorities are certainly anxious to see the line back in operation. Since it travels over flat countryside, the Limpopo line can carry heavier trains than the Beira corridor further north, where the terrain close to the Zimbabwean border is mountainous.

FAILURE

Some Zimbabwean traffic does currently use the port of Maputo. But to do so it takes a circuitous route, passing through South African territory. This situation suits Pretoria, which clearly has a lot to lose, politically and commercially, if the Limpopo line reopens.

A further factor in the MNR's switch to the south is the failure of its earlier plan to seize control of the central province of Zambezia. The offensive which the MNR launched against Zambezia from Malawian soil in September 1986 had run out of steam by the end of the year. The Mozambican counter-offensive, led by general Antonio Hama Thai, now promoted to chief of staff, wiped out most of the MNR's gains in Zambezia by the end of March, and eliminated the threat to the province's major towns, Quelimane and Mocuba.

MNR unites began filtering southwards, not only from Zambezia, but also from the other central provinces of Manica and Sofala. Reliable sources in Beira speak of large number of rebels crossing the Beira corridor as they move south. This cannot be interpreted simply as a defeated foe running away. It seems a conscious change in strategy designed to put pressure on the capital.

Certainly areas that had been considered reasonably safe for the last three years have come under attack since April.

The towns of Homoine and Panda in Inhambane province were raided, and "Voz de Combate" reported heavy clashes in the district of Guija on the north bank of

the Limpopo in Gaza. For the first time the popular Gaza tourist resort of Bilene was looted, and the MNR made off with most of this small town's food supplies.

There have also been air drops of supplies to MNR groups in Inhambane. One of these fell into a coastal lagoon, and at the beginning of July the armed forces claimed to have recovered three of the South African parachutes used.