

SUCKED INTO THE VORTEX

Southern African nations are bracing themselves to halt their continuing slide into the Mozambique vortex. In recent months, Zimbabwe and Zambia have been hit by a spate of cross-border raids by the South African-backed Mozambique National Resistance, and a Malawian plane was shot down on 6 November by Mozambican government forces. The 12-year-old war between the MNR and the Frelimo government has sent hundreds of thousands of refugees into Mozambique's six neighbours.

The armies of Zimbabwe, Tanzania and Malawi now have troops in Mozambique to fight the rebels. Harare's commitment is costing at least US\$500,000 per day, say Zimbabwean sources.

Hardest hit by the war has been Zimbabwe, which has become the MNR's favourite external target, because of its hefty military support for the Joaquim Chissano government in Maputo and because its well-stocked shops are attractive supply depots for MNR looters.

Since the MNR's first big raid in mid-June, the eastern highlands region has become a militarised zone, with Zimbabwe's crack Sixth Brigade operating along the border to protect rich tea and coffee plantations. But rebel attacks occur nearly every day, and the 6,000-strong brigade has found it rough going, army sources say. The Zimbabwean security forces, with 10,000 troops inside Mozambique appear increasingly unable to seal off

the 800km border to the MNR.

The shooting down of a Malawian aircraft in error by Mozambican forces in the central province of Zambezia in November marked a new chapter in Malawi's long involvement in Mozambique's war. Malawi once provided, wittingly or unwittingly, a haven for MNR units, even though rebel attacks on Mozambique's roads and railways greatly increased the cost of Malawi's foreign trade. But in September 1986, Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe warned President Hastings Banda that unless his country stopped supporting the rebels, they would take economic and, perhaps, military action.

Three months later, Malawi signed a joint security agreement with Chissano's government, and committed up to 500

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troops to help guard the northern Nacala railway, Malawi's shortest route to the sea. Since then, however, the MNR has claimed to have killed at least 30 Malawian troops inside Mozambique.

Zambia's latest brush with the war occurred in November, when Mozambican rebels operating in the northwestern province of Tete destroyed an agricultural cooperative, killed at least one Zambian, abducted others, and stolen cattle.

Zambia's President Kenneth Kaunda, echoing his Zimbabwean counterpart, Prime Minister Robert Mugabe, pledged to send the army to protect the border area. But protecting their borders against the rebels is a tall order for all of Mozambique's southern African neighbours. ■

Karl Maier in Harare