

# Small army, large country

Karl Maier meets  
the British-trained  
recruits on the  
front-line in  
Mozambique

Standing in a chest-deep trench in a small army camp in Ungubana, southern Mozambique, Private Florencio Eduardo Daniel slowly stirred a tin can of boiled beans and sliced sardine. Fresh water supplies had just arrived by train, and he was savouring this, his first real meal in a week. "We never know when the food is coming, and the well water is making us sick," he said. "At the British training camp, we ate well, dressed well and slept well. Once we came back to Mozambique, everything changed."

The well-stocked training camp in neighbouring Zimbabwe is hardly able to prepare Mozambican recruits for the chaos of the 13-year-old war in their country, where the nominally socialist Frelimo government, backed by both the Soviet Union and the West, is fighting a South African-backed guerrilla movement called the Mozambique National Resistance (Renamo). The war has forced millions of civilians to flee their homes and has pushed the southern African nations to the brink of famine. Severe shortages of food and supplies are a constant drain on the army's morale.

Private Daniel and the other 103 Mozambican troops encamped at this dusty railroad station 50 miles north of Maputo were the first full company trained by British instructors at the Nyanga camp. They finished the course last December amid great fanfare, as a symbol of the growing British and Western military aid to President Joaquim Chissano's largely Soviet-supplied army. Just before Christmas they arrived here to chase rebel bands through these thick brushlands. A second company took up position 15 miles south of Ungubana on 12 June, and two more British-trained companies are expected by next March, completing a full battalion, when the current programme expires.

Spirits at Ungubana remain relatively high, despite the failure of the Mozambican army's logistics system to provide adequate food and supplies. Just four of the first company's troops went awol this year, and all have returned to camp. The arrival of the British-trained "green berets", the soldiers boast, has scared off Renamo units in the area.

Yet the sporadic supply shipments raise key questions over the effectiveness of Britain's current military aid package for Mozambique. The Mozambican armed forces can certainly do with help on many fronts, including training. But President Chissano's biggest challenge is to improve



Members of the first full company of the Mozambican army trained by the British at Nyanga camp

the management and co-ordination of the 30,000-strong army, and this drive underpinned a major reorganisation of the high command last June. When asked during an interview last year what was the army's biggest problem, Mr Chissano's instant reply was "logistics".

To date, Western aid to the Mozambican army has been limited to non-lethal equipment and training. The British programme, though the biggest of any Western country, is still very modest, costing an estimated £5m this year. It will take years to have any real impact on the war, given the small number — 350 — of soldiers British instructors train each year. And because the course takes place outside Mozambique, the trainers are out of touch with local fighting conditions. British advisers involved in the effort are under no illusion that the training programme will break the deadlock in the war. "You can't be serious unless you are training in-country," said one Western military analyst. "The programme was designed by politicians, and its importance is largely political."

Nevertheless, the Chissano government hopes such Western assistance will help to curtail South African pressure on Mozambique while ensuring continued food and development aid to feed millions of war refugees and to revive the shattered economy. Mrs Thatcher, meanwhile, has been able to cite the Mozambican military training programme to counter criticism of her anti-sanctions policy towards South Africa.

The companies trained at Nyanga are guarding a British-funded effort to rebuild

the great southern railroad that skirts the Limpopo River on its 336-mile route from Zimbabwe to Maputo port. They are also playing a back-up role in the offensive launched on 18 May in Maputo province. These units are part of a mushrooming number of special forces set up with Western training and assistance. Most of the Frelimo soldiers receiving Western aid, like the British-trained units, are guarding projects of interest to the particular government or corporate sponsor. An élite force known as "the Tigers" protects the EC's biggest agricultural scheme near Maputo, and Italian construction teams have long been feeding and clothing government troops near their dam projects in the south. The widespread lack of security has also attracted profit-making private firms, such as the British company Defence Systems Ltd, which has trained about 400 Frelimo soldiers guarding the Nacala railroad in the far north.

Added to the myriad special Mozambican forces are the sizeable forces stationed by three of Mozambique's neighbours in the country to bolster the defence of important transport routes and potential economic targets. Zimbabwe is by far the most deeply committed, with at least 10,000 troops in Mozambique at any one time at an estimated cost of £300,000 a month. After successfully protecting the rehabilitation of the Beira corridor rail, road and oil pipeline linking Zimbabwe to the Indian Ocean, the Zimbabwe national army is now

concentrating on checking rebel sabotage of the Limpopo line. An indication of President Robert Mugabe's intentions came in mid-March, when Zimbabwean troops swept down upon three rebel bases in Gaza province and, according to Mozambican sources, killed one of Renamo's top southern commanders, General Gomes.

Some Western diplomats boast that their military aid carries the added bonus of reducing the Soviet Union's role in Mozambique. That appears to be wishful thinking. Though Western military analysts and some Mozambican officials deride the failure of Soviet military advisers here since independence from Portugal in 1975 to mould the government army into an efficient fighting force, Moscow remains by far the military's main benefactor, providing nearly all of its planes, helicopters, arms and ammunition.

And of all the special forces trained by Mozambique's allies, only the Soviet-instructed "red beret" commandos have made a major difference in the war. As they did last year, the "red berets" are spearheading a new, and thus far largely successful, offensive against Renamo in the rich northern province of Zambezia. On 2 June, they captured the district capital of Milange, on the Malawi border, which the rebels had held since September 1986. The ultimate target is Renamo's strategic mountain "Nantutu" base near Namarroi in the centre of the province, which has positioned the rebels in striking distance of key economic targets.

Although the government has scored recent gains against a 20,000-strong Renamo army badly short of food in certain areas and discredited by detailed refugee accounts of horrific atrocities against civilians, few Mozambican officials any longer believe in a purely military solution to the war. The government army is simply too small and the country too large.

Thus, in tandem with increasing military pressure on Renamo, President Chissano declared an amnesty last December and has stepped up contacts with the P. W. Botha government in Pretoria in an effort to reduce South African assistance to the rebels. But despite South African claims to the contrary and British tiptoeing around the issue, US and Zimbabwean intelligence sources say they have solid evidence that the South African defence force continues to furnish the rebels with logistical support and limited supplies.

The provision of small amounts of aid and training to the Mozambican army simply does not address the scope of the country's crisis. Mozambique is locked in a vicious circle: the economy can not function until the country is more secure, and the army cannot provide that security without more resources from a growing economy. In such an environment, the war could drag on endlessly. A well co-ordinated, non-lethal military aid programme, focusing on improving the army's logistics and administration while sharply increasing training levels, is the West's best chance of helping Mozambique to break out of that circle.