

MNR bandits swept out of Zambezia

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NAMPULA.
GOVERNMENT offensives in central Mozambique have pushed bandits into the rich northern province of Nampula where they are stepping up attacks against civilian settlements and economic targets, government officials say.

"They (the bandits) lost Zambezia, now they are trying to win Nampula," provincial governor Jacobe Nyambiry told Reuters in an interview in Nampula, Mozambique's third largest city and the commercial centre of the north.

Travel outside Nampula city is impossible without a military escort. Sabotage has caused the suspension of repairs on the Nacala railway linking landlocked Malawi with the coast. There are almost daily bandit raids on rural districts.

This shift in the fighting is the latest chapter of the nationwide bush war fought between bandits of the Mozambican National Resistance and the government almost since Mozambique gained independence from Portugal in 1975.

Government forces backed by Zimbabwean and Tanzanian troops have swept through the central Zambezi River Valley in a series of offensives which began in late 1986, destroying MNR bases and driving the bandits northwards out of Zambezia province.

But the result has been an upsurge of MNR activity in Nampula, which is rich in timber, ivory, precious stones and cash crops such as cotton and cashew nuts and, after Zambezia, Mozambique's most heavily-populated province.

"The main target is the railway but they also carry out acts of banditry to stop economic deve-

lopment," Cde Nyambiry said.

Nearly all the towns in Nampula district have suffered raids in which bandits usually attack, occupy briefly, loot, destroy and leave.

Government and international relief workers say that more than 700 000 people have suffered the effects of war in Nampula province — many of them refugees from earlier fighting further south.

In a hide-and-seek war, the bandits have the advantage of mobility, often keeping one step ahead of government forces who travel by vehicle and are largely confined to the roads.

Three or four lightly-armed militiamen guarding an isolated administrative post are no match for marauding bands of MNR bandits

BY PASCAL FLETCHER

who may suddenly strike in a strength of 500 or more.

"We can't be everywhere," Cde Nyambiry said.

But the governor said the MNR had set up a base with an air strip at Namilazo, between the villages of Cunle and Chinga near Nampula's southern limit with Zambezia.

Namilayo was the MNR's regional headquarters in the north from where it could strike at the Nacala railway, launch attacks on districts and infiltrate groups into Niassa and Cabo Delgado, Mozambique's most northern provinces.

Thickly-wooded mountains made it difficult for the government's Soviet-made helicopters and fighter-bombers to destroy the base, the

governor said. The government accuses South Africa of funding and directing the bandits but Pretoria denies the charge.

Another MNR sub-base has been located north of the Nacala railway line between the districts of Mecuburi and Muecate. It was used as a stopping-off point on the route to Cabo Delgado.

A third base was situated at Marire, north of Nacala port.

The governor said northern commanders were marshalling their forces for a dry season offensive in the next six months.

Part of the re-organisation involved efforts to discipline local militiamen, who have been blamed for some recent attacks in which road convoys were looted and their escorts killed.

"Our aim is to clear the entire region of the bandits and I am optimistic that we can do it," Cde Nyambiry said.

"We have located their bases and their main groups . . . when they lose their bases they have to stay on the move and we can pursue them," the governor added.

The governor said only Mozambican government troops were operating in Nampula province but several hundred Malawian troops were helping to guard a section of the Nacala railway where it linked with Malawi in the south of Niassa province.

A small number of Soviet and Cuban military advisers are based in Nampula city. A private British security firm is training a special force to protect trains on the Nacala line. — Ziana-
Reuter.