

MNR wrecks Malawi's exit line

BLANTYRE, Malawi. Hundreds of troops and technicians are still struggling to overcome a devastating act of rail sabotage on the line running eastwards from Malawi to the deepwater port of Nacala. A force of MNR guerrillas tore up 20km of track between the towns of Mutuali and Malema, made a series of fires with the wooden sleepers and laid the rails on top to ensure that they would become twisted and impossible to re-lay. About 5km of line still remain to be

replaced after weeks of effort. Although this should be completed by mid-March, the rebel action has set back hopes of bringing the Nacala line back into operation before the end of 1989. The damage to the Malawi economy will be severe, by forcing it to continue exporting its cash crops over the long and costly southern route.

What has startled the international team involved in a \$60m programme to restore the line is the sophistication of the MNR sabotage techniques. It is reported that the guerrillas recruited local villagers at gunpoint to help them lift and transport the rails to the 'destruction centres'.

There are suggestions that the attack,

with its clear political motivation, was carried out according to a masterplan conceived in South Africa; although there have been denials from Pretoria, evidence is accumulating that some army elements are still active in Mozambique.

There is also dismay that the Mozambique troops, entrenched in both Malema and Mutuali, felt unable to confront the rebels. The Malawi border is 100km further west, and although 5000 Malawian troops are also committed to the

defence of the line, they were not involved in countering the raid. Its job done, the MNR force retired without casualties — apparently to its long-established base 40km south of the line.

The French military training team, intended to instil new spirit and skills into the Mozambican troops (*Africa Analysis*, no. 63) has yet to arrive. French technicians who withdrew from the danger areas last July are waiting to return.

The range of MNR operations is reflected in the fact that attacks were mounted last month against rail traffic more than 1000km to the south, within sight of the South African border. In one incident, 11 people were killed and 16 wounded.