

Mozambique rebels massacre civilians—again

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MOVENE, Mozambique—In the corridor of the fallen railway car lie a woman and a young child, clutching each other in death as in life. The silence is disturbed only by the buzzing of flies around the congealed blood on the woman's face.

Elsewhere in the cars lie other bodies, distorted in rigor mortis. By the side of the railway line there are more corpses, at least one of which shows signs of bayonet wounds.

Journalists who visited this place Feb. 15 counted nine bodies that had not yet been moved. Added to the 57 corpses already taken to morgues, the death toll is 66 for this latest massacre carried out by the South-African backed Mozambique National Resistance (MNR).

This is kilometer 73, in the notation used by Mozambique Railways, meaning that it is 73 kilometers (about 44 miles) north of Maputo, this country's capital. It lies between Moveene and Chankulo on the line to South Africa, and is about eight miles from the border.

Here, on the morning of Feb. 14, the MNR exploded a remote-controlled mine under train number 620 to Maputo, packed with Mozambican migrant workers returning from the South African mines. The raiders let the locomotive and four freight cars pass before exploding the device. The passenger cars caught the full force of the blast. Two cars were blown down the railway embankment and came to rest on their sides. Two others were derailed but did not fall over, while the final two stayed on the rails.

The MNR then looted the train, and shot

or bayoneted many of the passengers. Some of the hundreds of passengers were able to flee into the bush, but others were rounded up and forced to carry the raiders' booty.

When we arrived at kilometer 73 some 24 hours later, the scene was still one of great desolation. The track was twisted and torn, and the concrete sleepers shattered for about 100 yards.

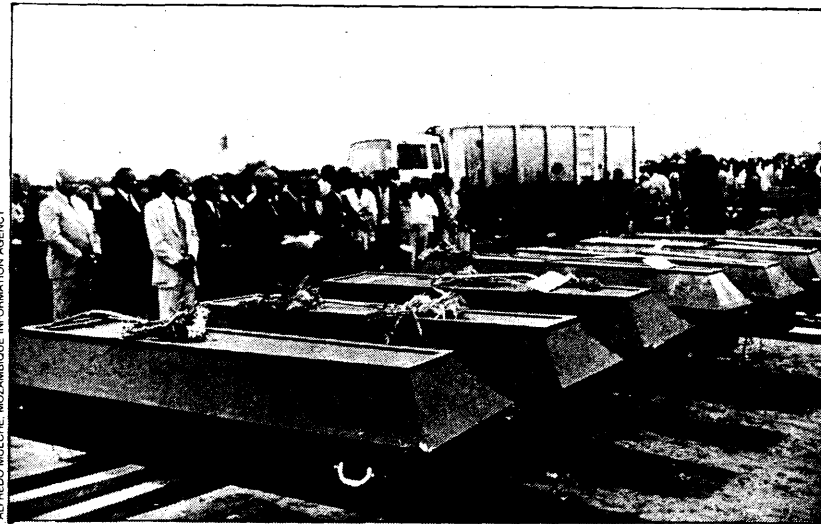
In and around the cars lay the debris of a journey that came to an unexpected and abrupt end. There were suitcases, and baskets and plastic bags from South African supermarkets. Shoes and other items of clothing lay scattered around the wreckage. Trampled into the dust were the loaves of bread that many of the passengers had been carrying.

Here were posters of popular South African soccer teams, leaflets distributed by the South African Chamber of Mines warning its workers against AIDS, and identity documents and work cards.

Precious personal documents fluttered in the light breeze—letters bearing Mozambican return addresses that loved ones had written to miners in South Africa. In one, Ilda tells Fernando, "I am pregnant," and ends her note with the message—heart-rending under these circumstances—"Two kisses of joy, and two of love."

Local military officers are convinced that those responsible for this atrocity recently infiltrated the country from South Africa. At the massacre site, 2nd Lt. Issa Aly, commander of a company of frontier guards at the border town of Ressano Garcia, told us that his troops had discovered evidence of a border violation 12 miles to the south.

He could not be certain of the date of the incursion, but the tracks were fresh and it



Mozambicans are mourning another 66 victims of South African-backed terror this week, as they did during this 1987 funeral for the victims of a MNR massacre at Tanninga.

must have been "in the very recent past." Lt. Aly is convinced this was the same group that attacked the train. "The bandits who did this didn't come from inside the country," he said.

Some of those abducted by the MNR were released the next morning. Amina Aboobacar, one of the lucky few, told us there was a debate among the rebels as to whether wounded captives should be killed. The local MNR commander, however, ordered their release. Aboobacar's face was bloodied from a superficial head injury. This saved her from the fate of other women prisoners who were selected by the gunmen as rape victims for the night.

Before her release, Aboobacar was forced to attend a "political meeting" at which the commander asked, "Who do you prefer—[the ruling] Frelimo or the MNR?" The circumstances were scarcely conducive to an honest reply.

The commander flatly rejected the government's peace initiatives and declared, "We don't like the nonsense your president has been saying, so we're continuing the

war to liberate the country."

As usual, the MNR office in Lisbon has a rather different account of the incident. It disclaimed all responsibility for the attack, which it blamed on the Mozambican army. This line was repeated by the MNR's "supreme commander," Afonso Dhlakama, in an interview on Portuguese television.

On the correct assumption that the Portuguese journalists would not bother to check the facts, Dhlakama claimed that such massacres only began in 1987, a few months after President Joaquim Chissano took office. They were therefore, he argued, a diabolical plot between Chissano and his Zimbabwean allies to discredit the MNR. (Zimbabwe has several thousand troops stationed in Mozambique to help the army combat the MNR.)

But massacres of the civilian population have been a constant, well-documented hallmark of MNR activity and date back to at least 1978, when the organization was still under the control of the secret services of the Ian Smith regime in what was then Rhodesia.

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