



The pylon blown up on 14 May, lies on its side at Tenga, 25 kilometres outside Maputo (AIM/Antonio Muchave)

Saboteurs hit Maputo's power

The repeated sabotage of the transmission lines carrying electricity from South Africa to Maputo deprived the Mozambican capital of its normal source of power for a total of 53 days in the first four months of 1990.

According to statistics made available to AIM by the state electricity company, EDM, April was the worst-hit month, with the power line out of operation for over 584 hours (more than 24 days).

In January, the lost time was 249 hours, in February 98 hours, and in March 338.5 hours.

There were a total of 29 interruptions to the power supply. Of these, 18 were due to technical problems on the line and were of short duration.

The major blackouts were due to 11 incidents of sabotage. On two of these occasions, on 11 January and 3 April, two pylons were knocked out. In the other nine cases the saboteurs just struck at one pylon. Not all of these acts of sabotage were communicated to the media by EDM at the time.

There was a respite in May, with just one attack on the line, on 14 May, when a pylon 25 kilometres from Maputo was blown up.

The technical problems from which the line suffers are often a secondary result of sabotage. For the constant repairs have left the line in a weakened state, and some of the pylons are shorter than they should be, thus leaving the high tension wires with insufficient clearance from the ground.

The line was completely rehabilitated in 1985, after suffering major damage in a freak storm. Since then 43 pylons have been sabotaged, a third of them

this year. In all there are 202 pylons on the line, which runs for 76 kilometres within Mozambican territory.

The sabotage has forced Maputo to rely increasingly on an ageing coal and oil fired power station, which is unable to meet the city's full electricity demand.

Whereas the line from South Africa can supply up to 100 megawatts, the available capacity at the power station is just 42 megawatts. Maputo's normal power requirements are around 72 megawatts. Inevitably, this leads to a situation of power rationing, as EDM implements a regime of rotating power cuts.

During the 53 days in the January-April period that the line was not functioning, the power station consumed 7,148 tonnes of coal, and 11.8 million litres of diesel. Under normal circumstances, the diesel turbines are not switched on at all, and the coal-fired units just tick over producing six megawatts.

The exceptionally heavy use of the power station this year has meant constant interruptions to urgent upgrading work to be carried out with finance from West Germany and Britain.

EDM General Director Fernando Julião estimates the losses to EDM from January to April at 5,000 million meticaes (about US\$5.5 million). This includes the cost of fuel for the power station, and the lost income from electricity consumers. No estimate has yet been calculated for the loss to the economy as a whole, resulting from reduced production in

the factories of Maputo and Matigoni where the bulk of Mozambican industry is concentrated.

In mid-May EDM witnessed a team of electricity workers repairing the pylon damaged in the 14 May sabotage. According to Fuade Sultuane, head of EDM's transmission department for its southern region, the 21 workers involved are highly experienced - they are the same group that has been repairing sabotaged pylons since 1985.

This particular pylon was about 70 per cent damaged. Those parts must be replaced, and welded onto the 30 per cent that is still intact. The heavy engineering factory Cometal-Mometal is now producing pylon parts specifically for this work.

The team works throughout the hours of daylight. "If a pylon isn't too badly damaged, it takes about three days to repair", says Mr Sultuane. "If it's completely wrecked, it can take between seven and eight days".

Before any pylon can be repaired, precautions must be taken to clear any mines left by the saboteurs, and then EDM often has to use bulldozers to clear a path through the bush to reach the site of the sabotage.

The most recent attacks on the line have occurred at dead of night. This particular pylon was knocked down at about 03.00 in the morning. Mr Sultuane says Renamo uses specialised groups of no more than four men to blow up the pylons. The normal method used is to place a charge of plastic explosive on each of the four legs of the pylon, either at the base or a metre or so above ground level.

Repair work can be dangerous. Five EDM workers have been injured in mine explosions. Two drivers of other companies whose vehicles were hired by EDM have been killed by mines.

But despite the danger, the repair workers have never refused to go on a mission, even though they can be away from Maputo for days, or even weeks, if they are repairing pylons near the South African border and cannot return to the capital at night.

Being constantly called away from their families "is a very difficult situation", says Jacinto Matusse, the engineer heading the team. "But we don't refuse - it's our profession".

"Since November, we've never stopped", says Armando Machope, one of the youngest members of the team. "We're always going out into the bush. As soon as we've finished repairing one pylon, we might have to go back again, because we find they've knocked another one down".

Contrary to rumours circulating in Maputo, the repair workers are not paid handsome bribes in foreign currency. They receive their normal salary, plus overtime pay, and a bonus for working outside Maputo, all in local currency. In Mr Sultuane's opinion, they work well, not out of financial considerations, but "because they know how much the company loses, and how much the national economy loses, when the line is down".