

Seven killed as MNR bandits ambush convoy

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By Elliot Mahende and Charles Kabera
AT LEAST seven people, including two Zimbabwean drivers, were killed and a truck completely burnt on Monday when MNR bandits ambushed a Malawi-bound convoy inside Maozambique amid rising tension along the Tete route.

Details of the attack and the exact number of casualties were still sketchy but a local businessman traveling along the road and who declined to be named yesterday said a truck belonging to Africa Wheels was completely burnt in the attack.

According to the man, the dead drivers worked for Africa Wheels and GDC Transport, another local haulage company. The dead civilians were hiking on the route and there were several other people injured in the ambush so much that the death toll could be higher, the businessman said.

The transport manager of Cargo Carriers, who also own Africa Wheels, Mr Watson, confirmed the incident yesterday but described it as "slight", saying he was still to get a full report on the ambush.

Mr Watson did not say where exactly the incident happened, but the businessman said it took place just before the trucks entered Malawi, an area that has been known to be particularly dangerous and where the MNR frequently blocked the road with huge stones.

The route, a lifeline to landlocked Malawi and Northern Mozambican towns, was cut off by bandit activity, and later secured by Zimbabwean troops before they were ordered to withdraw under an agreement between the Mozambican government and the MNR bandits in December last year.

Since then the bandits have frequently attacked convoys escorted by Mozambican armed forces on the route and in one such incident, seven truck drivers were killed in January this year in an ambush by the bandits, an incident that forced almost all the haulage companies to abandon the route and use the more expensive Chirundu route through Zambia.

However, a few truckers were back on the Tete route barely a month after this incident, led by Wheels of Africa, a company that is understood to be paying its drivers \$1 000 more for every trip undertaken through Mozambique.

However, some of the senior drivers working for the company have denied that it was the financial inducement that made them risk their lives driving through areas controlled by the Mozambican bandits.

One driver who declined to be named last week said the company had engaged many reserve drivers who were so keen to go on any trip so much that senior drivers who refused to go on the Tete route could easily find themselves with no trucks to drive.

Some people have questioned the morality of financially inducing the drivers to go on trips that have been described as "suicidal".

Zimbabwean drivers also said they were continually being harassed by Mozambican soldiers who protected the convoys. In one incident, one Zimbabwean driver is reported to have run for more than 50 km through MNR-controlled territory to escape Mozambican soldiers who had threatened to kill him after a Mozambican soldier was injured in an accident. The soldiers were blaming the driver for the injuries.

In another incident, the body of a Zimbabwean driver was reportedly left lying on the road for a week after he was killed in an accident.

Mr Watson, whose company is anxious to maintain good relations with the Mozambican soldiers, denied that the soldiers ill-treated the drivers but conceded that the drivers were being "disciplined" each time they broke rules such as overtaking.

● MNR bandits launched two attacks this week on the outskirts of Beira in violation of December's partial ceasefire.

The official Mozambique News Agency said the attacks were a clear violation of the agreement signed in Rome last December between the Government and bandits under which the MNR pledged to halt all attacks against the Limpopo and Beira transport corridors.