

# AFRICA CONFIDENTIAL

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## Mozambique: South Africa's nightmare

President Samora Machel and his *Frelimo* party are no better off now than they were nine months ago after the signing of the Nkomati Accord with South Africa. Mozambique has degenerated into a state of armed anarchy which is proving beyond the ability of any force in the region to control. Machel is so desperate that for him any option is preferable to

the *status quo*. The longer his dilemma continues the more likely he is to request Soviet or Cuban groundforces. The South African government, appalled at such a prospect, would stop the MNR guerrillas if it could. Yet the MNR operates with apparent impunity within earshot of Maputo and with regularity throughout the rural areas.

Two weeks ago the South African foreign minister, **Pik Botha**, appeared on South African television to say that prior to the Nkomati Accord South Africa was indeed arming and assisting the MNR. His confirmation of a fact that has been well known for three years, was intended, presumably, to give credibility to a declaration that South African aid to the MNR stopped with the signing of the accord. But, as examined below, South African support is unlikely to have stopped altogether.

It is inconceivable that South African intelligence does not know about or cannot prevent MNR hit-and-run tactics that are clearly launched from South Africa. Ten days ago two **Britons** driving from South Africa to Maputo were bayoneted to death less than two miles inside Mozambique. Tracks led directly from the ambush site across the South African border into a populated and undoubtedly closely-monitored area. If those tracks had been made by ANC guerrillas, the local South African security police would have been sacked by now.

The suggestion that South Africa still supports the MNR, however furtively, enrages President **Pieter Botha**. The implication that he is ignorant of what is happening, or alternatively that he does know but is unable to do anything about it, strikes at his personal prestige and the notion that South Africa is under the ultimate control of a civilian government.

For its part, Mozambique feels it has delivered its responsibility under the accord by curbing the activities of the ANC in its territory. The government has not been asked to comment on an eye-witness account of an incident at Maputo airport in December, when one of a number of crates of "agricultural implements" being loaded into a Soviet *Antonov* transport plane bound for **Lesotho** dropped onto the tarmac, broke open, and disgorged a quantity of automatic weapons. ANC property in transit, seven months after Nkomati?

### A nose-dive to cold reality

South Africa's newfound eagerness to reach some kind of viable agreement with Mozambique has arisen from the sudden awareness that South Africa now has more on its plate than it can handle. On top of the omni-present threat of urban black unrest, the traumatic drop in the value of the Rand against the **American** dollar is charted on the front pages of the local press with a masochistic absorption. The conventional South African view that the pace of voluntary change is a delicate compromise between black aspirations and the dug-in heels of white conservatives within and to the right of the ruling *National Party* is being overtaken by the observation that the tail is wagging the dog. The tail is defined as the sheer cost of apartheid, including propping up of the "homelands", an economy over-dependent on volatile gold (28% of the GDP) and on black labour which is intensive but no longer so cheap, and the military campaigns in **Namibia** and **Angola**. The prospect of vast expenditure in support of some vague ideological pre-occupation with Mozambique is more than the economy, and some politicians, can bear.

Meanwhile guerrillas are skirmishing on the outskirts of Maputo, cutting roads and railways, preventing the distribution of drought and emergency relief, disrupting power supplies and, in general, sowing the feeling among the civilian population that something will have to happen soon. Agricul-

tural "green zones" on the perimeter of the urban areas have done a little to ease food shortages, and the parts of the countryside not utterly devastated by the four-year drought scrape by with subsistence farming. *Metacais*, the local currency, is plentiful but virtually useless. Foreign currency, can buy almost anything, at least in Maputo's *Interfranca* foreign-currency department store. The hard currency black market offers 5,000% more than the official exchange rate.

Blowing up pylons and bridges requires a small measure of expertise; a couple of men shooting at civilian traffic none at all. An isolated ambush renders a road "closed" until a succession of intrepid, and successful, travellers declare it "open" again. MNR operations, even by the standards of irregular guerrilla harassment, are of a low order, which should not give *Frelimo's* counter-insurgency forces any cause for congratulation.

But the MNR cannot be dismissed as unprincipled "bandits" with no political ideology and no genuine popular support. It is short on the guerrilla's essential quota of ideological fervour, and Machel is the only politician who enjoys public affection, but the MNR's policy of intimidating foreigners perceived to be propping up *Frelimo* bears a hallmark closer to that of the *Irish Republican Army* than disorganized banditry. A foreign doctor working in a health clinic in Maputo was traced to his home address and given notice to leave the country, although he is married to a Mozambican. When the time limit expired his house was ransacked and burnt. His patients, too, have been warned off him; all of this within central Maputo.

South Africa acknowledges that the MNR is present in South Africa in the form of shadowy **Portuguese**-speaking businessmen (AC Vol 25 No 24), former residents of Mozambique, who wish to gain compensation for confiscated property or to resume their careers under a government more congenial to private enterprise - i.e. their own government (under MNR colours) or a Machel-MNR coalition. Their earlier stance that Machel and *Frelimo* would have to step down has been shifted to allow the possibility that Machel could remain head of state with the MNR holding specified key portfolios.

The projection of the "new" MNR as little more than an unorthodox but well-intentioned political lobby working for liberal reforms does not square with the brutality against civilian targets. There would be a rationale, however distasteful, in the use of terror to drive away potential investors, international aid agencies and foreign advisers whose combined efforts might give Machel the incentive to soldier on without making any concessions to the MNR. If that were so, the logical progression would be an intensification of terror attacks on Maputo and the provincial capitals. The realization that it was being frozen out by Pretoria might persuade the MNR to force its own deal independently onto Machel with, perhaps, a sharp mortar bombardment on the capital, the frying pan from which, the MNR claims, all escape routes are under MNR control. It appears to have the weaponry and is certainly within range of the outskirts if not the centre of the city.

(The MNR has carried out a brief mortar attack on a compound at the Moatize coal mine in Tete province where East Germans live behind an electrified fence topped with searchlights which they erected themselves.)

## The MNR's changing spots

The singular absence of co-ordinated strategy at a time when the MNR might be expected to narrow its aim supports the thesis that the "MNR" is not in the usual sense a single organization, and that there is no organization accountable for, or able to control, the acts perpetrated in "its" name. One of Machel's priorities at independence was to "de-tribalize" Mozambique in the interest of developing a national identity. In so doing he antagonized elements within the tribal structures which the Portuguese had left intact. When Ian Smith's *Central Intelligence Organization* put agents (AC Vol 23 No 15) into Mozambique to harass **Zimbabwean** guerrillas and to damage the *Frelimo* government, an obvious move was to exploit local resentment of *Frelimo's* de-tribalization policy, which was sometimes enforced with considerable severity.

The Rhodesian agents, some of them immigrants from Mozambique who spoke Portuguese and knew their way around, operated deep inside the country and were frequently left to their own devices for long periods. It seems likely, judging from present events, that these early tactics, reinforced by the South Africans when they took over Rhodesia's role, have led to the existence of semi-or wholly-autonomous armed bands, largely self-sufficient and answerable to no one unless it suits them. Not that the MNR functions as a patchwork of armed rebels confined to their local habitats. On the contrary, there is ample evidence based on dialects used and overhead during MNR operations that the rebels have wandered far from home. With food, clothing and other essentials everywhere in short supply, "bandits" would naturally prefer to conduct their plundering anonymously and elsewhere. It appears that some MNR groups have a tribal or sub-tribal structure, in much the same way as Sicilian families from a particular region transposed themselves intact to launch a Mafia branch in, say, New Jersey.

A precise identification of those who carry out acts attributed to, or claimed by, the "MNR" is further complicated by the number of incidents close to government army camps. When moving cautiously and precariously on the rural roads it is impossible to distinguish even at close quarters to which organization or band the armed men belong.

The ragamuffin appearance of *Frelimo* conscripts with filthy weapons and a random combination of unmatched uniforms, or a mixture of uniforms and civilian clothing, destroys any thought that *Frelimo* units will eventually flush out footloose rebels. Government roadblocks, overlooked at peril, usually consist of merely a single strand of fencing wire strung across the road without warnings of any description. They are barely detectable in daylight, completely invisible at night, and could be manned by anybody. Members of the government militia - disaffected, ill-fed, unpaid and unsupervised - probably take matters into their own hands, passing themselves off, when they bother at all, as "MNR".

That the MNR continues to receive supplies from more than one source and by more than one route is certain. To the list of self-confessed supplies from "Portuguese business interests" - should be added those of a Rotterdam oil dealer who appears to be investing some of the profits of spot market crude sales to South Africa to bring about via MNR pressure a government in Mozambique that will dispense oil exploration rights on favourable terms.

The prospect of a lucrative oil strike is inevitably the subject of intense speculation. Much of the early survey work offshore has been conducted by a British subsidiary, based in Isleworth, Middlesex, of the American giant, *Litton Industries*. The surveys, carried out on behalf of the Mozambique government, are assisted by a Norwegian aid team. The early analyses are by definition inconclusive but justified the despatch of two additional survey ships, one from Durban (which, on leaving the harbour, had its engine blow up) and another from Malta. On the most optimistic reckoning, it would take 10 years to turn Mozambique's oil into revenue.

The reported Rotterdam connection (AC Vol 24 No 1) has solid links with South Africa, but unless President Botha is lying

or impotent, the MNR's principal supply lines now originate elsewhere. The alternatives most frequently mentioned, Malawi and the Comores, are in the South African camp. Pik Botha recently visited the Comores for a meeting with Bob Denard, the mercenary leader who is behind the Comores' cosmetic Islamic throne. Pik's visit was partly an attempt to find a cheaper route to Europe for *South African Airways* which, barred from air space over much of the continent, is forced to take the long and expensive route around the bulge of West Africa. He has discussed landing rights with Somalia. The talks with Denard completed the formalities which now permit South African aircraft and crews, lightly disguised as "*Air Comores*", to operate a service between Johannesburg and Jeddah initially, and perhaps to Tel Aviv and destinations further west later.

Within the past fortnight, Mozambique claims to have detected and driven off an overflight, by implication an MNR air-drop, by two aircraft near the Caborra Bassa hydro-electric plant in Tete province. One of the aircraft was identified as a *Dakota* DC3, the other merely as being smaller. Mozambique is always quick to claim reported intrusions of its airspace by suspicious aircraft, but loathes or is unable to provide details. There are two mysteries about these flights. The first is that Mozambique has a network of mobile radar units on hills in strategic areas, and there is presumably a link-up with more modern Soviet detection devices such as the installation, in a prohibited zone, on Bazaruto island in the Mozambique Channel. The second is the unexplained crashing of at least two *Britten-Norman Islander* twin-engined light transport aircraft from the mainland. This type of aircraft is especially suitable for air-drops and parachutists. The journey from the Comores to north-eastern Mozambique is well within their operational range.

Mozambique was originally seen by Pretoria as a suitable subject for de-stabilization, regardless of the consequences, because it was Marxist, harboured the ANC and might one day provide the logistical support for anti-Pretoria guerrillas as it had for Robert Mugabe's ZANLA forces in Zimbabwe. South Africa's intention was thus to topple *Frelimo* and Machel. It then dawned on Pretoria that in so doing it would create in the eyes of the world an entity as unacceptable, useless and unrewardingly expensive as the Transkei and the other Bantustans. This led to the decision that the retention of Machel was essential for international consumption. The stick was replaced by the carrot of South African expertise and capital to revive an economy in the depths of desperation.

The argument pressed upon Machel since Nkomati is that South African capital will not venture into Mozambique unless it can play the game according to recognizable capitalist rules. Although Mozambique has heavily re-written its economic policies, abolishing unwieldy monstrosities like the state-run "People's Shops", some of the old revolutionary dogma lingers, in spite of its official burial at *Frelimo's* Fourth Party Congress (AC Vol 24 No 14). On the island of Inhaca, for instance, where the government has a joint venture with South African business interests to revive a tourist hotel, all the hotel staff from chefs to cleaners receive the same pay - about enough, over a month, to pay for a new pair of trousers.

It has come of something as a shock to South

Africans, who tend to look on Mozambique as part of their backyard, that foreign companies bigger and richer than their own may be willing to take a gamble on Mozambique. *Lonrho*, for example, has had discussions about rebuilding the tourist industry and managing agricultural concessions. It is the realization that other potential investors may not insist on the expulsion of the Eastern bloc that has persuaded South Africa that it too may have to learn to live with a "Marxist" presence, as long as it is nominal rather than executive.

The possibility that the lurking Eastern presence in Mozambique may evolve into Soviet or Cuban ground troops in large enough numbers to prevent the MNR from overthrowing *Frelimo* is the sharp shock that has pushed Pretoria's attitude towards Machel through the full circle. He must not be forced into seeking Soviet aid, it is said in Pretoria, even if in the last resort South Africa has to launch a large-scale military operation in Mozambique on Machel's behalf.

But it is extremely doubtful that the white South African electorate, which knows that a large number of its national servicemen are more or less permanently in **Angola** or **Namibia**, would accept another foreign commitment. Consequently the unit earmarked for operations in Mozambique is the so-called "Buffalo Battalion", predominantly black veterans of **Holden Roberto's** Angolan FNLA (Portuguese-speakers) and the pre-independence Rhodesian Army. Parts of this unit, with a reputation for ferocity and currently at very much more than battalion strength - it might be 4,000 strong - have already been moved from the western (Angolan)

border to within striking distance of Mozambique.

If the Buffalo Battalion is sent into Mozambique, and some of them might already have been in to look around, its first operation is likely to be a sweep through Manicaland, particularly through the area carrying the power lines from Caborra Bassa to the Transvaal. Since Nkomati, the MNR has blown up pylons with contemptuous frequency, at least 29 by the end of 1984 and often the same pylon within a day or two of it being repaired. Towards the end of last year the saboteurs began laying anti-personnel mines to discourage the repair teams. The idea behind Caborra Bassa, formulated before independence, was that the plant would deliver all its electricity to South Africa, where it could provide 10% of the country's energy requirements, and that a certain amount would be sent back to Mozambique. South Africa now has an energy crisis and could make good use of Caborra Bassa's cheap power; Mozambique could certainly do with the revenue. As it is, the power never gets further than the first broken pylon, and when idle, which is almost always, the plant loses about \$10,000 *per hour*, much of it in interest charges on loans taken out by the Portuguese government.

None of Mozambique's enormous potential, not even the comparatively small pickings to be gained from tourism, has the slightest chance of success until the security situation is resolved. That thought now seems to have been driven home in Pretoria and in Washington, where it has been announced that \$1 million of "non-lethal" military aid will be sent to Maputo ●