

Malan's Gordian Knot in the making

by Carlos Cardoso

In May 1970 the Portuguese colonial army in Mozambique launched its largest operation ever. Codenamed "Gordian Knot", it involved 50,000 troops, and was an attempt to encircle and destroy Frelimo, principally in the province of Cabo Delgado.

Rather more than a year previously another blow had been dealt to Frelimo. On 3 February 1969 the founder and first President of Frelimo, Eduardo Mondlane, died in Dar es Salaam, murdered by a parcel bomb sent by agents of colonialism.

The colonial authorities hoped that, with the removal of Mondlane, the serious contradictions inside the Frelimo leadership at that time would lead to such instability that the movement would disintegrate into small and irrelevant factions.

It did not happen like that. Frelimo's internal crisis did not wreck the movement. Once he had grasped this, the Portuguese commander-in-chief, General Kaulza de Arriaga, launched Operation Gordian Knot.

Today Mozambicans wonder if South African Defence Minister General Magnus Malan is about to imitate Kaulza de Arriaga and launch his own "Gordian Knot" against Mozambique.

President Samora Machel died on 19 October. Almost at once the South African media closest to the Botha government started writing about a supposed "power struggle" inside Frelimo. They were projecting as reality the wishful thinking of the Pretoria authorities.

But the Frelimo Central Committee elected Joaquim Chissano as Samora Machel's successor shortly after President Samora's funeral, and by acclamation. This was not what the militarists in Pretoria had expected.

In addition to the speedy and orderly succession, Malan and his colleagues must be concerned as to whether the reorganisation of the Mozambican armed forces, begun by Samora Machel, will continue. If Pretoria feels that such

reorganisation is bearing fruit, then Malan will certainly think of stepping up aggression.

Immediately prior to President Samora's unexplained air crash, not only did Malan launch a propaganda campaign directed personally against the President, but the South Africans also launched a surrogate invasion of the provinces of Tete and Zambezia by thousands of MNR bandits pouring out of Malawi.

This was Pretoria's response to the vigorous ultimatum given to Malawi by the front line states on 11 September.

Pretoria has two aims here. One is to safeguard Malawi as its dagger thrust into the heart of southern Africa, so that it can remain a sanctuary for bandits. But the second is to try and create new bandit bases in north-central Mozambique, with easy access to the sea, so that in future Pretoria will be able to land fresh supplies for its surrogates.

If this fails, then Malan will unleash his "Gordian Knot" - a direct attack by the South African armed forces against southern Mozambique, while some contingents enter the north of the country from Malawi.

Preliminary operations have already begun. Along the South African frontier with the Mozambican provinces of Maputo and Gaza South African special forces have gathered: these are normally used for "rapid intervention" operations.

If they are used in southern Mozambique in the next few weeks, the tactical objective may be to prevent the Mozambican and Zimbabwean armed forces from concentrating their efforts against the MNR in Tete, Zambezia and Sofala.

Malan's threats against Zambia and Zimbabwe should also be taken into account - they fit in perfectly with a strategy of generalised destabilisation as a prelude for Malan's "Gordian Knot".

It is already known that South Africa is training Zambian bandits in Namibia. These can be infiltrated back into Zambia via UNITA bases in southern Angola. Other reports, not yet confirmed, speak of 5,000 Zimbabwean "dissidents" in the northern Transvaal ready to enter Zimbabwe. This would be a means of diverting Zimbabwean forces away from Mozambique.

Of course, the Portuguese Gordian Knot was a failure, and marked the beginning of the end of Portuguese colonialism. Frelimo fought back with an unprecedented vitality.

According to veterans of the armed struggle, it was Gordian Knot that gave the Frelimo commanders the necessary fighting spirit to face the highly trained special units of the colonial army. Encircled, and with no possibility of flight, Frelimo commanders revealed a courage and combativity which surprised both themselves and the Portuguese.

Malan has already done two things which are highly damaging to his own cause. He has united the front line states around Mozambique more solidly than ever before, and there are now other countries prepared to come to the aid of the front line if necessary.

This closing of ranks was shown after Samora Machel's funeral when it was not a Mozambican delegation, but a Zimbabwean one, led by Deputy Prime Minister Simon Muzenda, that travelled to Moscow. In Mozambique the future of all southern Africa is at stake, and no front line state can afford to reject military assistance due to the ideological colour of the supplier.

There seem to be two ways of confronting Malan's preparations for war. One would be the unity of the front line armies, supported by extra-regional forces such as, for instance, the Soviet Union and India.

Alternatively, the West (and principally the United States) could decide once and for all to put the brakes on Malan's militarist adventures, by unequivocally threatening the South African government, or by imposing a military blockade of South Africa.

We can be sure that the death of Samora Machel was not Pretoria's final goal: it was one crucial element in a broader plan of destabilisation aimed at the political fracturing of the region - after which Malan would be ready to send his army in as "peacemakers".

Destabilisation is crucial to the power base of the South African generals. Without their bandit armies, the generals would lose political power in

Pretoria and would be politically unemployed.

They need to maintain the entire region in a state of instability (this includes South Africa itself - where a future bandit army is already being formed, consisting of "vigilantes", certain police units, and the military units of Gatsha Buthelezi's Inkatha).

As a corollary, Malan and his colleagues have to wipe out those leaders who can be factors of stability in the region. Not only has Samora Machel been killed, but at roughly the same time South African commandos tried to assassinate Robert Mugabe.

We may also ask: what might be the fate of the man most likely to lead a stable, united and democratic South Africa, the jailed ANC leader Nelson Mandela ?

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