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The Army

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Dear Mr. Martin,

If you ask Lázaro how many years of military service he has left, he will tell you he is through with army life. "I've convinced myself that I'm out," he says in his deadpan manner, "and I'm not going back." Sunday he will board a flight for his hometown of Pemba, in Cabo Delgado Province, and will then be beyond recall to his unit. Another "lion of the forest" will have departed the Popular Forces for the Liberation of Mozambique (FPLM).

It's not as if Lázaro (not his real name*) needs to put 1,500 miles between himself and military headquarters in Maputo to avoid capture and court-martial. Maputo is filled with war-weary FPLM soldiers and officers who have simply abandoned their posts. I asked Joaquim, an army second-lieutenant who intends to desert and return to his family in Beira as soon as he finishes his current regimental resupply trip in Maputo, what he will do when the military police arrive at his front door to arrest him. He laughed. "There's no control. When a soldier disappears, no one goes looking for him. And if they do come for me, I'll just tell them I'm not going, and they'll go away."

Many people describe the war between the FRELIMO (Front for the Liberation of Mozambique) government and RENAMO† as a stalemate. Without better organization, heavier weapons and consistently intelligible political goals, they say, RENAMO cannot advance further. No one disputes that the Resistance has achieved its interim goal: the total paralysis of the economy. The few functioning factories here are working at a fraction of capacity. Traffic between many points moves only in convoys with armed escort, and is nevertheless attacked as a matter of course. Only the main cities are under FRELIMO's control, and even these are heavily infiltrated with madjubas** (One version of the demotion of Governor Bonifácio Gruveta of Zambezia Province has it that his girlfriend was a Resistance agent who passed his military plans to the enemy.) But,

*none of the names of people quoted herein are.

**see glossary † also known as the MNR (Mozambique National Resistance)

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they say, RENAMO is incapable of all-out urban guerilla warfare or victory in prolonged, direct combat with government forces. "They've reached the limit of their competence," opined a well-informed Portuguese here.

What the stalemate school forgets is that even as the matsanga* fan out into previously uncontested regions, the Forças Populares are disintegrating. It seems unlikely that 1985 will fulfill FRELIMO's hopes as the "Year of the Total Liquidation of the Armed Bandits." RENAMO has grown considerably stronger since the Nkomati Accord of March 1984,** diversifying its sources of foreign financial and military support, closing in on the capital and, in the process, hacking away at the morale of the government forces.

Several thousand British-trained Zimbabwean troops protect key installations in central Mozambique. Rumor has it that a "private security force" from South Africa will soon be contracted to protect that Cabora Bassa hydro-electric dam in Tete Province and patrol the power lines running down western Mozambique into the Transvaal. The South Africans buy cheap electricity from Cabora Bassa (jointly owned by Portugal and Mozambique) and don't like having it cut off when RENAMO hauls down the high-voltage pylons. Tanzanian troops are also on duty in the north. Were it not for its local allies, FRELIMO would control even less territory than it does.

Why are the Forças Populares disintegrating? For the same reasons Mozambique itself is falling to pieces: hypocrisy, hunger, incompetent leadership and arbitrary rule.

It is rare to meet a soldier who isn't cynical. Present-day armies are fighting bureaucracies. Combine the alienating qualities of big organizations with the unquestioning obedience which is a precondition of military order and you get a basic recipe for disaffection. But add a broken promise, an empty stomach and a hungry family and you get a dyspeptic mush which will rise and bolt when it's fed up.

The big broken promise was one made to Mozambique's young men: after two years of obligatory military service, you may return unimpeded to civilian life. Joaquim, the second-lieutenant, has been in the army six years, the last four against his will, "I have a profession: I'm a secondary-school teacher. When they called me up in 1979, I went -- because it was the patriotic thing to do. Defend the country, right? But they never let you out again. 'The situation requires that you stay on,' they say." Lázaro, a mechanic who has spent the last six years in and out of the bush, tells a similar story. "You do your two years and you want to get out. They tell you to write a formal demobilization request. Three months pass and you ask about it. 'Oh, the

* see glossary

** In which South Africa and Mozambique each pledged to stop supporting the other's internal opposition movement. Since Pretoria was, until then, RENAMO's primary foreign backer, it was assumed that once it cut off support, the Resistance would fade away. It did not.

minister's out of the country,' they tell you, or, 'the minister's too busy to attend to it right now.' That's how the months go by. I just got fed up, and I'm not going back."

The longer the army tries to hold on to its draftees, the sooner they desert. A soldier in his third year of obligatory service, longing for his discharge, is not likely to hang patiently on when he sees fellows with six years' service not let go. Thus, the desertion rate rises proportionately to the length of illegally compelled service of the senior veteran. The paradoxical result of the army's tight grip on its battle-tested veterans is the falling average age of soldiers. After 10 years of post-independence hostilities, the Forças Populares are younger and less experienced than when the war began.

The army keeps its ranks as full as it can by resorting to press gangs. On Saturday, May 11, at the closing ceremonies of Youth Week, President Machel made a speech at Independence Plaza. He declared that "when the country ('A Pátria') is aggressed against, there is no obligatory military service: there is only chamamento, a call (to arms)." The following day, squads of soldiers roamed the city and suburbs of Maputo, picking young men out of movie-house and ration queues and shipping them out for training in Manhica, in northern Maputo Province. When people began complaining that their sons and husbands were disappearing, the government announced first that RENAMO infiltrators in Army uniform were responsible, and later that undisciplined Army officers had committed excesses. But few of the poor slobs who were impressed were returned home.

When FRELIMO came to power, the military draft affected young men from 18 to 21. Shortly thereafter, the eligible age was raised to 25; then to 30; to 35 and, most recently, to 40. Life expectancy (albeit at birth) in Mozambique is 46 years.

The one factor most destructive to morale and discipline is that soldiers in the Forças Populares get no food. In urban barracks, there is usually some sort of miserable chow: a corn gruel, beans and the like. In the bush, however, there is no supply system. The troops' only recourse, therefore, is to beg food from the local population. If the peasants are well-disposed towards FRELIMO or afraid of reprisals should they withhold food, they give. But with vast areas of the country only just beginning to recover from four years of drought; with more refugees and fewer active farmers; with greater hunger, nudity and misery than at any time in the last 30 years, there isn't much to go around. Both FRELIMO and RENAMO subsist largely by robbing villagers they consider friendly to the enemy or neutral. Lázaro told me a grim anecdote in which his unit arrived tired and hungry in a cassava field. Just as they began to pull up the tubers, however, RENAMO guerillas who had "staked their claim" shortly before opened fire. Many died with their mouths full.

If the population depends upon a detachment of troops, whether FRELIMO or RENAMO, for its defense, the soldiers in

turn depend upon individuals in the local community for their supernatural protection. The first thing many a soldier will do when he arrives at a new post is seek out the local curandeiro* for a potion or charm against injury. I was surprised to hear Lázaro claim and others confirm that RENAMO fighters have a charm that turns bullets to water. I laughed. How is the charm made? "The tail of a hyena," said Jorge, who served in the Portuguese colonial army; others vouched for the head of a snake. Lázaro believes that he's alive today thanks to a bush shaman. "After the treatment, he took me to a banana grove and told me to fire at a tree. I did. Not a drop of water came out. 'Now you're like that tree,' he told me." Another time, Lázaro's unit surprised three guerillas in the bush. "The guys on the left and right were armed: they fell as soon as we shot. We were only a few feet away. But the guy in the middle just stared at us, bug-eyed. He had only a spear. When we fired, he threw his spear to the ground and disappeared. A few hours later, the population told us there was a guy hiding nearby. We found him crouching in the bush. And the guy had an area -- like a burn -- on his side, where the bullets should have entered. You don't believe it," he said, seeing my lips pursed in a doubtful smirk, "but it's true." I have heard innumerable tales of the dark powers of the curandeiros in the last two months, but none impresses me more than the bullets-to-water story. The same superstition, it must be remembered, caused countless Mozambicans to fling themselves in front of colonial machine guns at the turn of the century. It is curious that so faulty a doctrine retains such currency. But the profound superstitiousness of the people here is better left the subject of a future newsletter.

This is a particularly brutal war. The overwhelming majority of the casualties are civilians. Village-burnings and massacres, more of them committed by RENAMO than FRELIMO, are common. Mutilations -- cutting off lips, ears and breasts -- are routinely practiced. RENAMO makes the communal villages established by the government a special target. Residents are first invited to leave their homes and live with the Resistance. A RENAMO pamphlet -- an appeal carefully typed on a sheet of coarse paper -- was recently shown to me by a man who was detained by the Resistance in Boane. "Mozambican," it began, "why do you live in a FRELIMO hencoop like a chicken or a goat?" If villagers ignore the appeal, they are subject to attack. Some people live willingly with the Resistance, which in some areas can provide the food, clothes and security that FRELIMO can't. Others choose life with the matsanga out of fear of the consequences should they do otherwise. Still others are kidnapped.

This week's death toll is particularly high, due to the Independence Day celebrations. The reader may recall my ill-considered suggestion that urban guerilla war in Maputo

* see glossary

was imminent. Instead of opening an urban front, it seems, RENAMO has redoubled its scorched-earth efforts immediately outside the city. The Resistance had promised to spoil Independence Day, and the news of some particularly deadly attacks has been coming in: 500 casualties in Catembe, across the bay from downtown Maputo; at least 120 dead in an attack on a military-escort convoy of buses from Manhica. Many are attributing this latter atrocity to FRELIMO, but in this case, I doubt it. The news of massacres in more distant places will percolate through Maputo in the next few days.

As a rule, RENAMO, with inferior man and fire power, rarely engages FPLM forces in direct combat. They operate in small, roving, ethnically heterogeneous bands. More recently, however, it seems like the duration of the average engagement has increased. I am told that whereas a few years ago a RENAMO attack was a matter of firing off a few clips at a passing convoy, current attacks last up to 40 minutes and more. Hit and run has become hit and stay. In a recent assault in Matola, a Maputo suburb, the guerillas raided a general store and obliged the patrons to carry the merchandise to their base. The unfortunate customers were trekking back and forth between store and camp all night. No one disturbed the attackers as they tramped through the streets and into the bush.

The Forças Populares don't often arrive at the scene of an attack for a variety of reasons. First, their transport system is terrible. Greater Maputo is freckled with sunny auto graveyards with all manner of military and civilian vehicles, requiescat in rust. When a truck breaks down, it is immediately cannibalized for parts; a snapped fan belt is a death sentence. (The poor quality of East Bloc imports doesn't help either. A good part of the army fleet is made by IFA, an East German company. Here, IFA stands for "Irmaos, Fomos Aldabados," or "Brothers, We've Been Had." A more graphic interpretation of the little IFA diamond emblazoned on the grill is "Ido Foder Africa" -- "Gone to F--- Africa."*)

Second, Mozambique is a big country, and overwhelmingly rural. Communications are poor or non-existent. It's fairly easy for even large groups to camp out undetected or scatter after an attack in a more densely populated area.

Third, and most important, the Forças Populares have no incentive to give chase to the enemy. The soldiers are ill-fed and equipped; the populations they are charged to defend are often hostile to FRELIMO and, because of the reasons described above, to any military presence. It is not unusual, Lázaro told me, to have government soldiers enter a village, ask if there had been any guerillas through recently and, upon a negative reply, walk into a RENAMO ambush. In Quelimane, a lone soldier on the road at night risks being run down by malicious drivers. But most debilitating to FPLM performance is that many soldiers no longer believe in what they're

* see also "andar de Lada" in the glossary.

supposedly fighting for. They are just trying to stay alive until they can get out of the army, and actively avoid armed engagement. Many have families at home going hungry, even on officers' salaries. Joaquim has a wife and three children to support on a salary of 10 contos* a month (of which he usually receives eight). With a kilo of black market fish at 1,800 or more meticaís, scraping by is a matter of trading on the black market -- in his case, military supplies and cigarettes. Diverting materiel, conniving with colleagues and taking your cut are prerequisites for bare survival here, and the military is no exception. In fact, with a virtual monopoly on force, first call on local produce and a supply of goods from abroad, the army is a black market emporium. Many soldiers are disgusted to have to steal for resale, but the fact that candonga** is rampant and begins at the top makes it easier. Nevertheless, this sort of corruption eats away at the morale of the troops and their regard for the Forças Populares and FRELIMO as legitimate institutions. "RENAMO doesn't need to start a guerrilla war in the cities," an Air Force officer named Simião explained to me recently. "They just have to keep up the pressure and this (the FRELIMO government) will collapse of its own rottenness."

So soldiers ask themselves the same question most Mozambicans do: why should I support the system? Many citizens opt out one way or another: they become majonijonis**³; quit the state sector to work for themselves, waste the day or sabotage (through let-it-lie negligence) operations at their workplace. Soldiers, however, must ask an additional question: why should I fight for the system? Few can give a satisfactory affirmative. Their families are suffering. They themselves haven't decent food or clothes. An Air Force lieutenant named Venceslau remarked to me recently that his only suit of civilian clothes was the one he had on, and even that was bought used from an American shipment destined for drought victims.† He told a story of a colleague, named Adriano Bomba, who in 1983 flew his ancient MiG to South Africa and asked for political asylum. After the fact, no one was surprised. "The only reason I'm still here is that I'm a patriot," he said. But even the patriots are now dropping out.

Like most soldiers (and civilians), Venceslau blames the government for the deplorable state of Mozambique. The war is going so badly because "we're led by ignoramuses. We have generals in the Air Force who can't read a map. I was up (in a helicopter) with one of these guys one day. 'Where are we,'" Venceslau brayed in mock-command style. "'Over Nampula, meu general.'" 'Where's that?' 'It's this province here, meu general.'" replied Venceslau, outlining the region with his index fingers, as if to a child.

* 1 conto = 1,000 meticaís.

** see glossary.

† see "roupa das calamidades" in the glossary.

"These generals," he continued, "when they come to a base, they only want to know one thing. It doesn't matter if none of the planes can fly or if morale is low. He wants to know: is the grass cut? Are the walls clean? If not, 'there's negligence here!' It's because these guys are rude ("não têm nível"), they only can concern themselves with things on their level. The reason they're generals today is that they fought in the armed struggle (against Portuguese colonial rule). If not, they would have been gardeners. So they're concerned about the grass." He sighed. "This war will never go anywhere as long as we're led by illiterates."

I suggested to Venceslau and others the possibility of a junior officer coup from within the Army. After all, I speculated, young, educated, professional officers are coming up in the ranks. They might refuse to tolerate the way the Armed Forces and the country are run. Everyone to whom I mentioned this disagreed with me. Abel, a civilian, pointed out in conversation with Venceslau that young lieutenants in Nampula with lots of combat experience were being passed over for promotion. "They don't want to make you guys captains. They learned from Doe."*

To illustrate the point, Venceslau told the story of the fall from grace of Major-General Américo Mpfumo. An Air Force officer, General Mpfumo is considered among the best educated (studied in Lisbon), most respected and professional men in the service. At a meeting with his superiors, he criticized the organization of the Air Force, remarking, as Venceslau related, that the fault lay with the leadership itself. He repeated a request regarding the diet of the pilots: it must be improved if they are to fly safely and alertly. His superiors were furious. "These kids," they are said to have shouted, "just because they've studied they think they're entitled to more than the People. But when we fought the armed struggle, we were lucky to get cassava and happy to have it!" His request was denied, and he was summarily sent to Tete Province (far, far away from the capital, out of coup range) as regional military commander.

I recently dined with a Japanese journalist who passed through Maputo to cover the tenth anniversary of independence festivities. After hours of conversation about the present state of Mozambique, he posed the question on the lips of everyone here: when and how will this end? I gave him the standard reply: I don't know, but things can't go on this way much longer. That seems like a self-evident truth. The people are hungry; even their Job-like patience is wearing thin. The army is disintegrating, in body as well as spirit. RENAMO seems stronger every day and more determined to destroy the FRELIMO government. At a June 24th press conference,

* Samuel Doe, a master-sergeant in the Liberian Army, pulled a coup in 1982 (or was it '81?) Remember the photos of ministers being shot on the beach?

Information Minister Jose Luis Cabaco denied that the government is negotiating a cease-fire or power-sharing agreement with the Resistance. That seems entirely believable: with RENAMO gaining the upper hand, a cease-fire would work to FRELIMO's advantage. Besides, RENAMO has a very weak command structure, and its leadership probably could not enforce a cease-fire on its field units. Power-sharing is even less likely.

It seems vain to speculate on how things will come to a head. Suffice it to suppose that an Army revolt of some gravity will play a part. As reported in my last newsletter, public opinion on such questions varies by race and class. The better educated and whiter you are, the more likely to think that the country will continue to deteriorate but remain under FRELIMO's control, and that any change will come from above. (due to pressure from South Africa, the IMF, etc.). Many blacks, by contrast, give FRELIMO another six months to a year in power. But someone has yet to paint a credible scenario to illustrate that assertion.

I would be remiss if I did not add a final word about the roast chicken that has become the talk of Maputo. This rara avis appeared at the Independence Day celebrations and, if government figures are to be believed, tantalized 200,000 famished citizens as it wound its way down the parade route. Never has so little left so bitter a taste in the mouths of so many.

This singular bird was the showpiece of the Hotel Rovuma float. Like most major state and private companies in Maputo, the Rovuma, hotel of the FRELIMO Party, rigged up a flatbed truck on which it presented a tableau of its particular activity. The float was partitioned into three see-through "rooms." In the first, a chambermaid fussed with the coverlet of a luxurious twin bed. In the third, a chef with a tall, white cap pattered about in a well-appointed kitchen. In the center room, a group of impeccably dressed diners sat at a table replete with china, silver and crystal, while a crisply-uniformed waiter offered them a platter bearing the roast chicken in question. This cruel charade was played over and over, in mechanical, slow motion as if to reinforce the unreality of the event, to the finger-pointing jeers of the crowd. It has been years since the great majority has tasted so rare a delicacy. The average household's supplementary holiday ration was a can of sardines -- one per family. This phony spectacle, put on for the benefit of the foreign guests and press, really stuck in the throats of the hungry spectators. "Pouca vergonha" was the remark of a friend and father of three children -- "no shame. With so many people hungry..." His voice trailed off. This is not to say that the Party forgot the masses, another friend reminded me. Everyone who marched (compulsorily) received a hard roll (bread!) and a paper cone of spoiled milk. "All the kids got diarrhea." But I'm sure the men on the reviewing stand, resplendent in gold braid and military medals, weren't aware that the milk was spoiled: according to the newspaper, they were

obliged to rush off to a reception at the Hotel Polana and carve up the three meter-high tenth anniversary cake. Bad politics or no, these guys insist on flaunting their full stomachs.

Is it any wonder no one joined in when President Machel croaked out five minutes of "Kanimambo FRELIMO" ("Thank You, FRELIMO") while we waited for the militia to goose step by?

GLOSSARY

- (1) aldeia communal - lit., communal village. As a FRELIMO institution, these have been a favorite RENAMO target.
- (2) "Andar de LADA" - also, "andar de NIVA." To travel by LADA and NIVA, model names of Russian cars. A privilege reserved for Party apparatchiks. In Maputo, "LADA" stands for "Leva Atrás Director Analfabeto," or "Bearing in Back (seat) an Illiterate Director."
- (3) bandido armado - lit., "armed bandit." The standard government term of reference for the Resistance. Also used when reporting on UNITA activities in Angola and ZAPU (Joshua Nkomo's partisans) in Zimbabwe.
- (4) candonga - the black market.
- (5) cbamamento - lit., "a call" (to arms). The government euphemism for the draft.
- (6) changuitos - diminutive for matsangas (see below). Used pejoratively by FRELIMO troops.
- (7) cheka - a raw recruit to the FPLM; origin unknown.
- (8) curandeiro - perhaps the best translation for this is "medicine man"; the root of the word is curar, to heal. Bush shaman is somewhat cruder. Curandeirismo takes many forms, including spell-casting, clairvoyance and telekenesis. More on this in a future newsletter.
- (9) "Guerra e Morte ao Inimigo da Pátria" - lit., "War and Death to the Enemy of the Nation." The RENAMO slogan. These guys need some positive thinkers in the marketing department.
- (10) leoões da floresta - lit., "lions of the forest," sobriquet of the Forças Populares. Reserved for rousing, chauvanistic speeches in public and snide remarks in private.
- (11) madjuba - a RENAMO informer is thus called; origin unknown.
- (12) majonijoni - Mozambican migrant laborer who works in South Africa. So called because they gravitate towards Johannesburg. They are preyed upon by both RENAMO and FRELIMO when they cross the border in cars loaded with goods bought in South Africa.

- (13) matsangas - or phonetically, "matchanges" (strike a hard "tch"). Slang for RENAMO. So called after one of their founders, André Matadi Matsangaíssa, who died in a government attack in 1976.
- (14) rabotas - FPLM slang for Russian military personnel. Apparently, the Mozambicans kept hearing the Russians say "rabota." What that means, I can't say.
- (15) roupa das calamidades - lit., "calamity clothes." Used clothing donated by Western governments and charitable organizations, destined for distribution to drought and flood victims. Much of it is diverted and sold in Maputo, and nudity remains a serious problem in the interior. A particularly hideous outfit is liable to be lampooned as "calamity clothes."
- (16) sheriff - a popular nickname for President Samora Machel, inspired by the surfeit of stars on his uniform. "Just like Texas," Joaquim explained to me.
- (17) soviets - not the Russians. Soviet is slang for radical, white Mozambicans who are "more revolutionary than the revolution." Often recognizable from the little Mozambican flag pinned to their labels. It is a telling sign of their insecurity as white citizens of a black African nation and their consequent need to identify closely with the revolution itself (as distinct from region or ethnicity).

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