

The impact of Zimbabwean liberation struggle on Botswana: the case of Lesoma ambush, 1978¹

CJ (John) Makgala
University of Stellenbosch

ML (Matshwenego) Fisher
(formerly with Botswana Defence Force)

Abstract

Polelo e e lebegane le kganyaolo e e diragetseng ka kgwedi ya Tlhakole a le 27 ka ngwaga wa 1978 ele tlaselo e e maatla thata go diragalela sesole sa Botswana Defence Force (BDF) se e neng ele gone se tlhamiwang. Tlhaselo e ne e dirwa ke sesole sa bo ntwana dumela se se kgethegileng sa difofane sa lefatshe la Rhodesia ka nako ya ntwana ya kgololesego ko Zimbabwe. Polelo e simolola ka go kanoka mekwalo e e se tseng e dirilwe le go lebelela merero ya tsa mafatse a sele mo lefatsheng la Botswana, ga mmogo le bokgoni ba sesole mo Botswana ka dingwaga tsa bo 1970. Polelo gape e itebaganya le seemo sa itshireletso ko molelwane wa Botswana le Rhodesia. Go tshabela mo Botswana ga batshabi ba Rhodesia le gone go a sekwa sekwa. Gape go buiwa ka go tlhamiwa le tiriso ya BDF ka tshoganelo ele go fokotsa manokono a ditlheselo ko molelwane. Tlhaselo le kganyaolo ya masole a Botswana kwa motseng wa Lesoma le kgalo ya tirigalo e mo Botswana le mafatshe a bodichabachaba go a lebanejwa. Gape re bontsha gore tlhaselo e ene ya supa kemonokeng e ko godimo ya Botswana le bagwebi ka go ntsha dithuso go thusa ba ba neng ba amilwe ke tlhaselo ko Lesoma.

Keywords:

Liberation; Foreign policy; Military ambush; Instability; Patriotism; Zimbabwe liberation struggle; Botswana; Lesoma ambush.

Introduction

Whereas there is an appreciable corpus of published literature on the impact of the South African liberation struggle on Botswana, there is inadequate work on the impact of the Zimbabwean liberation struggle on Botswana, particularly on the cross-border raids in Botswana. The little research carried

¹ This article is dedicated to Professor Neil Parsons on his retirement from the University of Botswana.

out is limited to about two unpublished BA student research essays.² Despite being fairly well researched and written these student essays lack conceptual approach to Botswana's position on international relations. Moreover, they do not focus on the Lesoma incident. Richard Dale's numerous works on Botswana and Zimbabwe during this period do not contain a systematic study of the Lesoma ambush, which he refers to as the BDF's first 'baptism of fire'.³ Neil Parsons, Thomas Tlou and Willie Henderson's biography of Seretse Khama does cover Lesoma and its aftermath but this is very brief as they were concerned with many other issues and events in the life of Botswana's first President.⁴ These authors refer to the Lesoma massacre as 'the most traumatic moments so far in the history of Botswana'.⁵ A recent seminar paper by the historian, Part Mgadla, goes some way in addressing the issue but it focuses on the liberation struggle on a larger scale covering South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe and Mozambique, and does not provide a micro-study which this paper does.⁶ In 2000 the Commander of the BDF, Lieutenant General Matshwenyego Louis Fisher, assembled a research team of seven members to conduct field research and compile a report on the ambush. The data in the resultant BDF report, which was not an academic work but mainly tailored for the needs of the BDF,⁷ is used in this essay as a primary source material.

-
- 2 K Mabikwa, "Impact of the Zimbabwe liberation war on the border people: A case of North East District, 1970-1980" (BA research essay, University of Botswana, 2000) and R Sanoto, "The impact of the Zimbabwe liberation war on the Babirwa, 1970-1980" (BA research essay, University of Botswana, 1992).
 - 3 R Dale, "The creation and use of the Botswana Defence Force", *The Round Table*, 290, 1984, p. 223. Some of his works are: R Dale, "loosening connection in Anglophone southern Africa: Botswana and Rhodesian regime, 1965-1980", *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 2, 1983, pp. 257-258 and R Dale, *Botswana's search for autonomy in southern Africa* (Westport, Conn., Greenwood Press, 1995).
 - 4 N Parsons, T Tlou and W Henderson, *Seretse Khama, 1921-1980* (Braamfontein, Macmillan, 1995), pp. 353-355; Also see T Tlou and A Campbell, *History of Botswana* (Gaborone, Macmillan, 1997), pp. 383-384.
 - 5 P Parsons, *at el, Seretse Khama*, p. 353.
 - 6 P Mgadla, "Deportations, kidnappings, espionage, threats and intimidation during the liberation struggle in Botswana, 1965-1985" (Paper, The South African Historical Association conference, University of Cape Town, 25-29 June 2005); WG Morapedi, "The dilemmas of liberation in Southern Africa: The case of Zimbabwean liberation movements and Botswana, 1957-1980" (Paper, the South African Historical Association conference, University of Cape Town, 25-29 June 2005); B Gumbo, "Liberation wars-tourism woes: The impact of Southern African liberation wars on tourism in Botswana: The case of Chobe" (Paper, The South African Historical Association conference, University of Cape Town, 25-29 June 2005).
 - 7 Botswana Defence Force (BDF), "Lesoma ambush: A case study" (Paper, Sir Seretse Khama Barracks, 2000). This source is classified. The research team conducted intensive oral interviews with important political leaders, senior government officials, military leaders, Lesoma village headman and survivors of the ambush and Lesoma villagers. Among the interviewees were Lt. Gen M Merafe (the then commander of BDF), D Kwelagobe (cabinet minister at the time), Dr K Koma (leader of Opposition in Parliament, 1984-2004), LM Selepeng (permanent secretary in the Office of the President in 1998), P Steenkamp (Permanent Secretary in the Office of the President in 1978), Maj. Gen. Motang (BDF), Col. M Rankhudu (BDF), Maj. B Malesu (BDF) and Kgosi A Kheswe (Lesoma).

This essay examines an aspect of international relations in a small and then desperately poor Botswana, which at the time was sandwiched between hostile and vicious white minority regimes. In 1966 Botswana attained independence from Britain with the pragmatic and far-sighted Sir Seretse Khama as President. The situation was worsened by the fact that Botswana, a landlocked country, was heavily dependent on apartheid South Africa for her essential imports, exports and infrastructure. Many Batswana were still working in the South African mines, farms and other sectors. Botswana also relied on Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), a South African ally. Some Batswana in the north-eastern part of the country had relatives and employment in Rhodesia. The long and porous border between Botswana and Rhodesia meant that people easily crossed from one side to the other and vice versa.

Mabikwa wrote:⁸

[T]he border was originally a road from Tati to Pandamatenga, running right through the middle of villages. It was established in 1895, marked on the ground in 1959 and fenced in 1978.

Therefore, the people in the border area had relatives on both sides of the border.

Right from the beginning Botswana's precarious situation meant that her foreign policy and approach to the liberation movements had to be a very cautious one.⁹ Rhodesia and South Africa were too powerful economically and militarily while Botswana did not even have an army until 1977. Even then the BDF could not match the tried and tested, and well equipped Rhodesian army which received assistance from the more powerful South Africa. Therefore, Seretse's anti-apartheid government chose to provide moral support to the liberation movement while ensuring that they did not set military bases in

8 K Mabikwa, "Impact of the Zimbabwe Liberation War on the Border People..." (BA research essay, University of Botswana...), p. 2; JH Polhemus, "Botswana's role in the liberation of Southern Africa"; LA Picard, *Evolution of modern Botswana* (London, Rex Collins, 1985), p. 229; LH Gann and TH Henriksen, *The struggle for Zimbabwe: Battle in the bush* (New York, Praeger, 1981), p. xi; JTM Nyamupachitu, "Bechuanaland Protectorate-Southern Rhodesia international border: Its effects on the partitioned Ikalanga speaking society, 1890-1966" (BA research essay, University of Botswana, 1989).

9 BZ Osei-Hwendie, "The role of Botswana in the liberation of southern Africa", W Edge and MH Lekorwe, *Botswana: Politics and society* (Pretoria, JL van Schaik, 1998), pp. 425-439; DR Black, "Botswana: The small but steady hand", DRB Mugenyi and LA Swatuk, *Foreign policy in small states* (Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1988); R Dale, "The challenges and restraints of white power for a small African state: Botswana and its neighbours", *Africa Today*, 25 (3) July-September, 1978; R Ajulu and D Cammack, "Lesotho, Botswana and Swaziland: Captive States", D Martin and P Johnson, *Destructive engagement: Southern Africa at war* (Harare, Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1986), pp. 139-169; GA Sekgoma, "A note on Botswana's foreign policy and ideological stance", *Trans-African Journal of History*, 19, pp. 152-164.

the country from which they could launch attacks into Rhodesia. This was similar to the initial position of Zambian President, Kenneth Kaunda, who was steadfastly opposed to armed struggle until 1965 when Rhodesia rebelled against Britain and the latter seemed reluctant to exert heavy pressure on Rhodesia in order to allow black majority rule. Despite Botswana's extra-caution, alongside other independent Southern African states the country was a member of the Frontline States which sought to replace white minority rule with majority rule in Southern Africa.¹⁰

While Britain was granting her African colonies political independence in the 1960s in Rhodesia the resistance to Black majority rule was so serious that Prime Minister Ian Smith opted for Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) from Britain in order to maintain the *status quo*.¹¹ Efforts for a negotiated peaceful settlement with the African majority bore no fruit and in the early 1970s the liberation movement in Rhodesia intensified armed struggle against the recalcitrant Smith regime.¹² The war spilled into Botswana as the Rhodesian army pursued the liberation fighters or guerrillas into the country. By the mid 1970s the situation had gotten out of hand and many Batswana in the border area were adversely affected. This forced the Botswana government to set up the BDF for the defence of the Botswana-Rhodesian border. It was within this context that while the Rhodesian soldiers were in pursuit of guerrillas they ended up ambushing a BDF Platoon near Lesoma village in February 1978.

Contextual framework

In this article the traditional geopolitical or 'territoriality' paradigm which emphasises the advantages of a country's geographical position in foreign policy or international relations is utilized. It was argued that the mainland USA was protected by the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans which made her secure against the attacks which European countries suffered during the First World War.¹³ Whereas this theory was seen as obsolete owing to the advent of the

10 S Smith, *Frontline Africa: The right to a future* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990).

11 RC Good, *UDI* (London, Faber & Faber, 1973).

12 N Bhebe and T Ranger, *Soldiers in Zimbabwe's liberation war* (London, Portsmouth NH, and Harare, Heinemann and University of Zimbabwe Press, 1995).

13 JH Stoessinger, *The might of nations: World politics in our time* (New York, McGraw Hill, 1993), p.13, HJ Morgenthau, *Politics among nations* (New York, Alfred A Knopf, 1967), p. 106.

atomic age and intercontinental ballistic missiles capability¹⁴ it seems to hold in case of small nation states with small budgets and relying on outmoded conventional weaponry. This was the case between Botswana, Rhodesia and the Zimbabwean liberation movements. “The Rhodesian army essentially waged war with the technology of the second world war – aircraft, motor transport and artillery. The guerrillas made war in the style of a nineteenth century colonial army, depending on carriers for their transport, on food bought from or voluntarily supplied by villagers, and on the recruits on the refugees who had fled to Zambia and Mozambique”, writes Lacquer.¹⁵

The argument of the writers is that if Botswana did not have common borders with the white minority regimes, the borders which the guerrillas easily crossed to launch attacks in Rhodesia, Botswana would not have suffered cross-border attacks from the Smith regime. A good example is Tanzania which provided training camps for South African and Zimbabwean freedom fighters but did not suffer cross-border reprisal raids which Botswana endured.

The territoriality disadvantage and lack of resources to establish an army forced the government of Botswana to adopt an idealistic foreign policy. The idealist approach entails relying on morality and respect for human rights, cooperation between states and through international organisations and the upholding of international law for purposes of conflict resolution¹⁶ or peaceful co-existence as it became known in the Botswana’s diplomatic parlance. While Botswana’s situation can be explained through the idealist paradigm her overbearing and ruthless neighbours related with her in a manner suited to the realist or ‘struggle for power’ approach. This was demonstrated by their heavy militarization and disregard for international law, human rights and international institutions in order to maintain their racist regimes and exploitation of the black majority economically.¹⁷

This section is ended with an illustration of how the liberation war affected the Rhodesia’s relations with the United States of America (USA), Britain and the United Nations. While this is a familiar story it is worth retelling for purposes of contextualisation as well as giving the paper an important Cold

14 JH Herz, *International politics in the atomic age* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1959), p. 22.

15 W Lacquer, *Guerrilla: A historical and critical study* (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1977), p. vii.

16 FS Pearson and MJ Rochester, *International relations: The global conditions in the late twentieth century* (New York, McGraw Hill, 1992), p. 18; JS Goldstein, *International Relations* (New York, Harper Collins College, 1996).

17 On South Africa’s foreign policy see J Barber and J Barratt, *South Africa’s foreign policy: The search for status and security, 1945-1988* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990).

War dimension. The adoption by Rhodesia in 1961 of a new constitution which totally disenfranchised the African majority and approved by Britain gave impetus to radical nationalists seriously considering armed struggle for attainment of freedom. While the United Nations called for inclusion of the Africans in the voters roll Britain requested the Smith regime to strike a compromise with the Africans. The defiant Smith responded through the UDI in 1965.

By 1964 the liberation movement groups cadres were training in guerrilla tactics and sabotage in Ghana, Algeria, Tanzania, North Korea, Cuba, the Soviet Union and China. The liberation movement also obtained conventional arms from the socialist states. On arrival from training the cadres, who lacked experience in guerrilla combat tactics became easy pickings for the Rhodesian forces. An example reminiscent of the Lesoma ambush was a running battle between Rhodesian security forces and the liberation movement insurgents near the town of Sinoia on 29 April 1966. This incident resulted in seven Africans killed and many others arrested, while a great deal of equipment was recovered by the Rhodesian soldiers. Kenneth Kaunda's disillusionment with the British government and the Smith regime led him to supporting armed struggle and even honoured the guerrillas who fell to the Rhodesian forces at Sinoia as martyrs.¹⁸

For its part the United Nations' Security Council voted for selective economic sanctions against Rhodesia. However, this was not enough as countries such as the USA continued trading with the Smith regime by importing chromium from Rhodesia. Therefore, in 1968 the Security Council extended sanctions to all imports and exports with exception to emergency food and medical supplies. However, for Botswana sanctions against Rhodesia could not be applied wholly as Seretse pointed out in 1968:

As a young country we are concerned with the development of our resources, some of which involve Rhodesia. We feel we cannot go to the whole hog and carry out the United Nations resolutions to the letter.¹⁹

The success of the liberation movements in Angola and Mozambique led to new pro-Marxist governments in 1975. This development together with the intensification of the Zimbabwean liberation war, which received major boost from the Mozambican government, forced the USA, through its Secretary of

¹⁸ RC Good, *UDI*, p. 235.

¹⁹ GM Carter and EP Morgan, *From the Frontline: speeches of Sir Seretse Khama* (London, Rex Collins, 1980), pp. 20-21.

State, Henry Kissinger, in 1976 to declare that his country would no longer give material and diplomatic backing to the Smith regime. Efforts by Kissinger and the British to convince the Smith regime to acquiesce to African majority rule did not bear fruit until November 1977 as the guerrillas further intensified their military campaign. In November 1977 negotiations for one-man-one-vote began between influential Western powers, the Zimbabwean liberation movements and Ian Smith amidst the escalating guerrilla warfare. With the war consuming more than half of the Rhodesian national budget Smith was forced to accede to the demands of the nationalists. Lengthy negotiations with the nationalist leaders which were backed by more guerrilla attacks led to final agreement and genuine elections in February 1980 and independence for Zimbabwe. The dejected Ian Smith would later claim that he was betrayed by Britain and South Africa.²⁰

The security situation on the Botswana-Rhodesia border area, 1965-1978

The UDI and adoption of armed struggle as a vehicle to freedom in Rhodesia coincided with Botswana's independence. Unlike many African countries, which were attaining independence from departing European powers, Botswana inherited no army. The country relied on the small paramilitary Police Mobile Unit (PMU) to patrol the borders and apprehend armed guerrillas, who under Botswana's no 'springboard' policy had to be disarmed and escorted to Zambia.²¹ The only assistance the British gave Botswana was providing two of its army personnel to train members of the PMU in 1967. Through a bilateral agreement in 1968 Britain provided the Botswana Police Force (BPF) with army instructors.²² Nevertheless, the small number of police officers meant that the country was seriously under-policed. The National Development Plan no.1 (1965-1973) indicated the intention of augmenting the BPF from 1090 to 1265 personnel.

By the end of November 1976 the security situation on the Botswana-Rhodesia border, particularly the North East area, began to worsen. On three occasions in one week the Rhodesian security forces skipped the border into Botswana without provocation. Rhodesian refugees also began to pour into

²⁰ I Smith, *The great betrayal: The memoirs of Africa's most controversial leader* (London, Pan, 1997).

²¹ N Parsons, et al, *Setetse Khama*, p. 342.

²² R Dale, "Creation and Use of BDF...", *Round Table*, 290, 1984, p. 218.

Botswana fleeing misery back home.²³ In December 1976 Vice President Quett Masire lamented that:

since the 27th December 1966 thirty-one violations of our territorial sovereignty by members of the Rhodesian security forces have come to our notice. Twelve of them have taken place this year, the situation is serious... murder, arson, kidnapping and destruction of houses with explosives are directed at Batswana, not just refugees.²⁴

Since the Rhodesians killed and harassed Batswana inside Botswana without encountering any military resistance the country was forced to increase the personnel of the PMU. Moreover, there was mounting pressure for the country to establish a fully fledged army to counter the Rhodesian attacks. Meanwhile the situation deteriorated further, and in mid December 1976 the Smith regime declared the Botswana-Rhodesia frontier a war zone code named Operation Tangent. In practice this area stretched deep into Botswana. Dusk to dawn curfews mounted by the Rhodesians became common in the area. Rhodesian helicopters dropped leaflets on the Ramakgwebana border headlined: "NOTICE TO ALL PERSONS LIVING ALONG THE BORDER". The contents read:²⁵

The new law says that you may not go within five kilometres of the border between sunset and sunrise each day. This is an order made in terms of Section 14(1) of the Emergency Powers (Maintenance of Law and Order) Regulations of 1974, by the Protecting Authority for Matebeleland Province'.

The helpless Botswana government could only seek assistance from the United Nations. Seretse Khama rejected Rhodesian offers of negotiations simply because the solution to the problem was for the Smith regime to respect Botswana's frontiers.

The obdurate Smith regime did not heed Botswana's plea and on the night of 17-18 December 1976 the notorious Rhodesian Selous Scouts (SS)²⁶ crossed into Botswana and intimidated the Francistown PMU camp with machine gun fire. Seretse and his Cabinet responded by declaring the area 30 kilometres from the Rhodesian border a "protected zone" with the police empowered to

23 See Botswana National Archives (BNA), Gaborone, "Francistown Refugee Administration Commission Reports", Office of President (OP) 27/3; OP 27/4/74, 1972-1973.

24 Republic of Botswana, "Rhodesia attacks Botswana", *Hansard* 60, 17 December 1976 (Gaborone, Government Printing, 1976).

25 BNA, Rhodesian Government, "Notice of curfew" (Salisbury), OP, 9/19.

26 P Stiff, *Selous scouts: Rhodesian war – a pictorial account* (Alberton, Galago, 1984); B Cole, *The Elite: The story of the Rhodesian Air Service* (London, Bloomfield Books, 1984).

stop and search unhindered in this zone. The understaffed PMU mounted serious patrol of the protected zone through roadblocks and at one point shot dead one 'coloured' man for giving them a hard-time.²⁷

The security situation along the Rhodesian border deteriorated by the day and threats, shootings and kidnappings of Batswana into Rhodesia became common.²⁸ Arson and killings perpetrated by the Rhodesian agents were also reported on the Botswana side of the border. Although the government was forced to expand the skeletal staff of the PMU this was not enough.²⁹ In the morning of 19 January 1977, one Elsie Ndlujula of Jackalas No.2 village sustained serious injuries after being shot while she was fetching water from the Ramakgwebana River.³⁰ Another of many acts of intimidation and naked aggression by the Rhodesian soldiers was the shooting from across the Ramakgwebana River of about ten shots at a 16 year old boy as he was trying to salvage thatching grass from a hut his family had abandoned owing to acts of intimidation and harassment by the Rhodesian soldiers. In March 1977 it was reported that about four Batswana from Moroka and Mahatane villages were kidnapped by the Rhodesians.³¹

The worsening security situation adversely affected the socio-economic fabric of the people on the border area. Some Rhodesian refugees, who were awaiting transportation to Zambia were accused by Rhodesian forces as guerrilla fighters who were launching attacks in Rhodesia from Botswana. Other Batswana working in Rhodesian urban areas had to return home where they faced bleak future and serious security concerns. As the security deteriorated on the border area some people relocated to areas far away from the war zone. This meant that they left their crop-fields and cattle-posts unattended and there were reports that Rhodesian agents were smuggling cattle from Botswana into Rhodesia.³² In some cases starving refugees on their way to Francistown and other areas helped themselves to the farm produce.³³ Furthermore, cattle from Botswana which strayed into Rhodesia were rarely recovered, and in cases where some recovery was made there was a serious risk of the beasts spreading

27 P Parsons, et al, *Setetse Khama*, p. 343.

28 P Mgadla, "Deportations, kidnappings, espionage" (Paper, The South African Historical Society conference, 25-29 June 2005).

29 *The Botswana Daily News*, 5 January 1977; *Daily News*, 19 January 1977. The *Daily News* is a government owned daily newspaper and was the only local newspaper circulating in the country during this period and it is one of the main primary sources in this essay.

30 *Daily News*, 21 January 1977.

31 *Daily News*, 1 March 1977.

32 Botswana, *Hansard* 60, 21 November to 1 December 1977 (Gaborone, Government Printing, 1977), p. 46.

33 K Mabikwa, "Impact of Zimbabwe Liberation War", pp. 16-18.

animal diseases such as Foot and Mouth which occasionally breaks out in the area. This was a serious problem given the fact that beef was a key foreign exchange earner for Botswana during those years. In an effort to prevent the spread of animal diseases cattle recovered from Rhodesia were destroyed by the Veterinary Department and this added to the woes already faced by the local people. To add salt to injury there was no compensation to those affected in this way.³⁴

Businesspeople operating in the border villages were subjected to a hard time from the Rhodesian soldiers and to some extent the guerrillas.³⁵ Guerrillas and refugees also relied on the local shops for their provisions, hence the shop-owners became targets for the Rhodesian soldiers who also looted the shops. So serious was the situation that by mid 1977 some businesses closed down. By December 1977 it was reported that:

[T]he Botswana businessmen in the north east district have closed their shops after being tipped that they are among the local people listed by the Rhodesian forces for abduction. The first man to close his shop was Mr E. Modiakgotla whose 16 year old son, Disang Modiakgotla was abducted by the Rhodesian forces on 25 November 1976. The second is from Magatane lands who so far has left the area for his own security.

Francistown was subjected to a number of 'bomb-scares' through anonymous telephone calls claiming that bombs were planted in certain business buildings and this led to interruptions of business in the affected business and the neighbouring ones.³⁶ On the border villages important social activities or events such as funerals and weddings were also seriously affected as people limited their participation in them owing to security considerations. Fewer and fewer people attended funerals and weddings. A student wrote that 'Burial proceedings at cemeteries became very short. In certain instances, especially in instances where the deceased was a victim of the war, burials were conducted quickly in silence'.³⁷ Attendance at schools was also affected particularly as pupils who travelled long distances to school could be confronted by armed Rhodesian soldiers, a terrifying sight to the children.

34 Botswana, *Hansard* 59, 31 August 1977.

35 Mabikwa, "Impact of Zimbabwe Liberation War", pp. 24-25.

36 *Daily News*, 7 February 1978.

37 K Mabikwa, "Impact of Zimbabwe liberation war", p. 33.

The refugee factor

In the 1960s, following independence, there was only a small number of refugees entering Botswana from the neighbouring countries. For instance, it is recorded that in 1967 only 42 refugees entered the country while 85 left and the total number of refugees in the country by December 1967 was 181.³⁸ However, by the end of 1968-69 some 3,371 refugees fleeing Portuguese colonial oppression and liberation war in Angola entered the north-western part of Botswana. Although during this time Botswana had not yet formulated a policy on political refugees it went ahead offering asylum to political refugees but announced its policy that such people must not engage in the violent overthrow of any country from within Botswana. The government enacted the Refugees Act in 1974 in line with the United Nations Charter and the 1951 Geneva Convention on refugee status.³⁹ This was also at the time when the Rhodesian liberation war was gaining momentum.

Naturally, the oppressed people in Rhodesia, South Africa and Angola fled into Botswana and became political refugees. Some Rhodesian refugees, who were awaiting transportation to Zambia for military. Unfortunately, the Rhodesian forces claimed that these refugees were guerrilla fighters who launched attacks in Rhodesia from Botswana.⁴⁰ The Rhodesian forces used this excuse in order to launch attacks in selected targets in Botswana. According to Neil Parsons, Thomas Tlou and Willie Henderson:⁴¹

...the situation was worsened by the opening of the Nata-Kazungula road or 'Botswana-Zambia highway' along the border on January 20th, 1977, as it was used both by hitch-hiking Zimbabwean guerrillas and increasing numbers of South African or Rhodesian vehicles. In the second week of January, Archie Mogwe took Botswana's plight to the United Nations, backed up by the foreign ministers of Zambia and Tanzania – with further support from Mozambique and Nigeria. Mogwe told the Security Council of 36 border incursions by Rhodesian forces 'obviously to intimidate the Government of Botswana into changing its present policy of giving refuge and assistance to victims of oppression'. The result was the Security Council's resolution No. 403 of 1977, adopted on January 14th, which was to send a special mission to Botswana to report as a matter of urgency on resources needed to cope with the threat to security and the influx of refugees. Mogwe was 'hurt' because, even after West and East Germany combined to support the resolution, Britain and

38 RT Kgosiemang, "The illegal border crossings: the evolution of the Botswana immigration policy" (BA research essay, University of Botswana, 1991), p. 8.

39 *Botswana, Hansard*, August 1974 (Gaborone, Government Printing, 1974).

40 BNA, *Sunday Times*, 17 February 1972, OP 27/46.

41 P Parsons, et al, *Serese Khama*, p. 343. Also see *Daily News*, 14 January 1977.

the U.S.A. decided to abstain from voting for it, on the grounds that it would prejudice an early settlement to the Rhodesian problem.

By 1977 the Rhodesian refugees were flooding into Botswana and this put a great deal of strain on Botswana's meagre resources which had to be diverted from provision of developments for the citizens. With the refugees problem not raining but pouring in 1978 the government established a refugee camp in Dukwi to the north of Francistown.⁴² Needless to say some agents (collaborators) of the Rhodesian regime on espionage missions masqueraded as refugees.

Formation of the Botswana defence force, 1977

With the situation on the border area not abating the government of Botswana was forced to pass a piece of legislation in March 1977 proposing the establishment of the BDF. The government had previously objected to the idea of an army citing financial constraints⁴³ and a rather false believe that no country could attack a defenceless and armless neighbour:⁴⁴

The proposals were very modest: 'A' company was to have 140 men, while 'B' company was to have between 160 and 180. Mompoti Merathe of the Botswana Police was appointed the BDF commander, with Ian Khama –who was already on the battle-front with the PMU based at Francistown –as his second in command. The other problem that Botswana faced in setting up its army as an emergency measure was that both Britain and the US refused to sell arms and equipment without long procedures of official and congressional vetting which would take months, if not years, to complete. Botswana therefore turned to the ready international market for arms and purchased Soviet weaponry, notably the AK-47 assault rifle, with which to equip its new troops.

The BDF operated on a shoestring budget and also received donations from local and international well-wishers. Local donors included Francistown Civil Servants' Association branch⁴⁵ and the Botswana Red Cross Society⁴⁶ among others. An army is an important instrument for the enhancement of any

42 I Maposa, 'History and impact of Dukwi refree camp, 1978-1993' (BA research essay, University of Botswana, 1994); RJ Southall, 'Botswana as a host country for refugees', *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, 222, 1984, pp. 151-177.

43 *Daily News*, 14 May 1977.

44 P Parsons, et al, *Serese Khama*, p. 345.

45 *Daily News*, 31 January 1978.

46 *Daily News*, 3 February 1978.

country's foreign policy and the establishment of the BDF was no exception for Botswana as Richard Dale observed in 1983:⁴⁷

the BDF can unequivocally serve as an instrument of foreign policy, the control of which in Botswana is handled by the Office of the President. Ever since the acquisition of independence, foreign policy in Botswana seems not to be a policy sector independent of, or superior to, other sectors; rather, it has been the handmaiden of the presidency and seems to have no independent base of power. This subservience is particularly significant for Botswana which, as a small power, needs to orchestrate all the instruments of domestic and foreign policy to maintain and perhaps even to enhance its leverage in global, continental, and regional politics.

However, the BDF had serious equipment limitations as it lacked critical conventional weapons such as Armoured Personnel Carriers (APCs), tanks, artillery, helicopters and communication equipment. All that the BDF had were five infantry companies equipped with personal weapons and some elements of support weapons in the form of automatics and mortars. The weapons and equipment held by the BDF compared poorly to the equipment held by their Rhodesian counterparts. Among equipment in its arsenal the Rhodesians force had Rocket Launchers, GPMG's, sophisticated personal weapons and helicopters used for operations and casualty-evacuation.⁴⁸

This acute disparity meant that the BDF was more of a "token" army which could not hamper the aggression and attacks of the Rhodesian forces in Botswana since in May 1977 two most horrendous acts attacks took place. First there was a handgranade attack at Francistown's Mophane Cub where some 400 revellers were dancing to a live band music. This attack was followed by the first major attack on the BDF at its camp at Mapoka by the Smith's regime's helicopters and armoured troop carriers forcing the BDF to exchange fire for about two hours starting at about 3 o'clock in the afternoon. The Rhodesian soldiers numbered more than 150 while members of the BDF were 15. BDF reinforcements were sent but when they arrived at the scene of the fighting the rebel forces had withdrawn.⁴⁹ So serious was this Rhodesian aggression that at the end of May the United States and Britain expressed their dismay. Unfortunately, the "[i]nternational press coverage was mixed in

47 R Dale, "Creation and use of BDF...", *Round Table*, 290, 1984, p. 221; M Handel, *Weak states in the international system* (Totowa, NJ, Frank Cass, 1981); RS Jaster, *A regional security role for Africa's Fronline States: experiences and prospects* (London, Adelphi Papers No.180, 1983) and Foltz WJ and HS Bienen, *Arms of the African: military influences on Africa's international relations* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1985).

48 BDF, "Lesoma ambush", p.20.

49 *Daily News*, 18 May 1977.

its attitude towards Botswana. Everyday reporting of incidents on the border with Rhodesia was biased towards Rhodesia because correspondents lived in Salisbury or Johannesburg, where they always got the Rhodesian version of the events first".⁵⁰

The Lesoma ambush recounted

The ambush, which claimed lives of fifteen BDF men and two civilian guides, took place at the Lesoma sand ridge on the route leading to the Nata-Kazungula road deep inside Botswana. Around 1100 hours in the morning of 27 February 1978, Jameson Kelesitswe, the Headman of Lesoma village, sent two young boys to the BDF military post at Kazungula to report on the presence of the Rhodesian military helicopters which were flying in the vicinity of Lesoma village. The boys were Gure Kelesitswe, Headman Kelesitswe's son, and Uwe Simon, his cousin. They were both about 16 years old. It appears that during the morning of the day in question, there had been an exchange of fire between the Rhodesian soldiers and the guerrillas. The Rhodesians most probably suffered some casualties and were then in hot pursuit of the guerrillas, who had since fled and crossed the border into Botswana, in the area of Lesoma village.⁵¹ This incident and the noise caused by the helicopters forced Lesoma women who had gone to their fields for ploughing to run away for cover in fear of gunfire. Nevertheless, it was normal for the guerrillas to cross into Lesoma in search of food and tobacco from the locals. They used to come without fire-arms. Therefore, it appears that there was a cordial relationship between the guerrillas and the villagers.

On their way to Kazungula the two boys, who were riding on bicycles, met with a BDF patrol on a vehicle at the intersection of the way and reported the matter to the patrol. The patrol advised the boys to leave their bicycles behind and jump into the vehicle for the site but first went to the nearby main base. On arrival at the base the Platoon Commander, Lieutenant Sennanyane, was informed and he immediately mustered a platoon of 35 men to go and investigate the alleged information. The patrol took along the two boys and departed for the village on three land rovers. However, it seems that the Platoon Commander and his subordinate commanders had

⁵⁰ P Parsons, et al, *Seretse Khama*, pp. 345-346.

⁵¹ Interview, M Bakane, (Mother of the late Uwe Simon, and Gure Kelisitswe, one of the survivors of the ambush), BDF, "Lesoma ambush", p.10.

not issued orders to their men before leaving the base. Moreover, while it was No. 4 Platoon that was earmarked for the task, some members of No. 2 platoon forced themselves into the landrovers.⁵² This was clear evidence of inexperience on the part of the command on the spot. Moreover, there were no maps of the area of operation available to the Platoon and again the troops were operating in a total intelligence vacuum. By contrast the Rhodesians had a long established intelligence system which infiltrated the liberation movements even in Botswana.⁵³ It was claimed that some of the Rhodesian intelligence gatherers posed as tourists and game hunters.⁵⁴ The platoon in effect moved to the scene of action like a police force moving to the scene of crime. The BDF's inexperience in such a situation is reminiscent of the ZAPU guerrillas or 'Sinoia martyrs' who became easy pickings for the Rhodesian forces at the beginning of the Zimbabwean armed struggle in the 1960s.

On reaching the general area of the high ground –which was also the site for the ambush, the patrol de-bussed and went into the bush. The drivers, the two boys and the Platoon Commander drove into the village to meet with the Headman for more elaborate information. It appears the Headman told the Platoon Commander that they had seen Rhodesians' helicopters near the border on their side, and also that some armed guerrillas fled into the nearby bush inside Botswana. After combing the area for about two hours the search team managed to apprehend two AK-47 toting guerrillas in the nearby bush after which the Platoon thought its task finished and was ready to go back to base. It seems the apprehended guerrillas cautioned the Platoon that there was a likelihood of confrontation with the Rhodesian soldiers in pursuit of the guerrillas following an earlier exchange of power between the two groups.⁵⁵ It would appear that the BDF Platoon felt that the possibility of an attack by the Rhodesian soldiers on BDF, especially within their own country was not feasible. Thus the same route was used back to base. The movement back to base was more administrative than tactical. The total number was 35 soldiers, the two boys and two guerrillas and their equipment all in the three land rovers. It seems the Rhodesians were observing the events at the time the BDF soldiers apprehended the guerrillas and loaded their arms cache into their Landrovers. Probably, the interpretation the Rhodesians got was that the BDF soldiers were assisting the guerrillas in transporting them and their

⁵² BDF, "Lesoma ambush", pp.11, 16.

⁵³ H Ellert, "The Rhodesian Security and Intelligence Community, 1960-1980", Bhebe and Ranger, *Soldiers*, p. 93.

⁵⁴ *Daily News*, 9 March 1978; *Daily News*, 4 January 1977.

⁵⁵ BDF, "Lesoma ambush", p. 12.

stores.

Around 1700 and 1800 hours and after travelling for about 500 meters the vehicles fell into an ambush. It is said that there was a flash as the leading vehicle was shot by what appeared to have been machine-gun fire. Suddenly the rear vehicle was also hit and then there was intense and devastating fire from the left side of the road, and all the three vehicles caught fire in the ambush. The area was the high ground where the patrol had earlier stopped. The patrol was caught completely by surprise causing panic, fear and confusion amongst everyone. It became an individual effort to find one's way out of the ambush site. 20 soldiers including one boy and one guerrilla managed to escape the ambush, either with severe injuries or none at all. Most of those who perished appear to have been shot whilst in the vehicles. It is worth noting that the canvas structures were not removed, though the canvas was half rolled to allow for observation. It is evident that the majority of the troops did not return fire except Private Mathe who was found dead with an expended magazine nest to his rifle. It is alleged that the ambush party charged on the killing ground and stabbed some with bayonets to confirm if dead or alive. Those found still alive were thrown into the flames of the burning vehicles. This action by the ambush party appeared to have been quick and haphazard since, not all people were stabbed or thrown into the burning flames. It would appear that shortly thereafter the ambush party withdrew back to Rhodesia.

On hearing the gunfire some BDF soldiers at base rushed into the direction of noise and met with some of the survivors who narrated the tale. Meanwhile arrangements were made to transport them back to base and some to the hospital. The following day on 28 February, the Commander and his deputy, Gen Mompoti Merafhe and Ian Khama Seretse Khama respectively arrived in Kasane. The Commander and operations commander accompanied some troops to the ambush site to inspect and collect the remains of the dead and also to search for some survivors. At the end 15 bodies of BDF soldiers were confirmed dead and in addition the body of Uwe Simon, one of the boys, was also identified. His body was not burned and was buried in Kasane by his family. Another body, presumably being that of one of the apprehended guerrillas was also identified. It is not clear as to where he was buried.⁵⁶ Otherwise the 15 bodies of the BDF soldiers who perished were all buried at Gaborone cemetery. Vice President Quett Masire told the mourners that the government had intended to bury the victims in their respective villages

⁵⁶ BDF, "Lesoma ambush", pp. 13, 15.

but the state in which they were found compelled that they be buried in Gaborone.

Needless to say the treatment meted out to the BDF soldiers by the Rhodesian troops after the ambush was inhumane. The throwing of the injured and dead soldiers into the burning vehicles was in contravention of the Geneva Convention on the law of armed conflict.

The Lesoma aftermath

2 March 1978 was declared a day of national mourning and schools throughout the country were closed and employers in Gaborone and the surrounding villages were requested to release their workers to allow them to attend the funeral of the victims of the ambush in Gaborone.⁵⁷ The Batswana were overcome with grief as a result of the wanton massacre of the BDF soldiers and innocent civilian. Policemen wept when the bodies were loaded onto an aircraft at Kasane, and people fainted at the mass funeral in Gaborone.... The emotions were repeated and amplified at services in the 11 villages and towns all over Botswana.⁵⁸ Messages of condolence poured in from many countries and international organisations. For his part the United States President Jimmy Carter wrote, 'I was shocked, deeply saddened when I learned that a number of your soldiers had lost their lives in an encounter with the Rhodesian Defence Forces'.⁵⁹ David Owen, the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs wrote to President Sir Seretse that:

in handling all this burdens you have exercised the greatest statesmanship in the search for a peaceful settlement in Rhodesia.

Locally condolences also came in from the Chinese and Swedish embassies in Gaborone as well as the Botswana Muslim Association among others.

The nonchalant Rhodesian authorities justified the Lesoma carnage by claiming that BDF soldiers who carried AK-47 rifles must have been ZAPU guerrillas.⁶⁰ However, Barbara Cole indicates that the Rhodesian Special Air Service had positively identified BDF soldiers together with the guerrillas.⁶¹ Though a military response to this brutal ambush was warranted, the BDF

⁵⁷ *Daily News*, 3 March 1978.

⁵⁸ P Parsons, et al, *Seretse Khama*, p. 354; *Daily News*, 2 March 1978; *Daily News*, 3 March 1978.

⁵⁹ *Daily News*, 3 March 1978.

⁶⁰ P Parsons, et al, *Seretse Khama*, p. 354.

⁶¹ B Cole, *Elite*.

at this stage did not have the capacity in terms of equipment and training to carry out a retaliatory strike on the Rhodesian troops. Hence, it was clearly a case of glaring disparity in the combat potentials of the two sides which prevented any counter action by the BDF.⁶²

The helpless Botswana had no choice but to close its border with Rhodesia at Kazungula.⁶³ The government also began demanding visas from Rhodesian passport holders, “previously holders of Rhodesian passports were afforded the visa-exemption privileges enjoyed by the holders of passports of Commonwealth countries”. Masire also told Parliament that the Lesoma incident meant that time has come for the country to reconsider its policies and its entire approach to the Rhodesian question without delay.⁶⁴ Seretse Khama, who in reference to the Smith regime said to the new Danish Ambassador to Botswana Bjorn Olsen that:⁶⁵

“Desperate men have no sense of value. No sense of morality. And no regard for the sanctity of human life’, made it clear that ‘Botswana won’t submit to tyrann”.

At the University College of Botswana the Burton Mguni⁶⁶ led ten-man Student Representative Council (SRC) was overthrown owing to its ‘insensitivity’ over the Lesoma carnage. An interim seven-man Students Caretaker Council was appointed.⁶⁷ Although there were many allegations of mismanagement and misappropriation of funds the SRC was particularly censored for proceeding with a trip to Swaziland for sports meetings amidst the national calamity at home. One speaker or agitator at the meeting charged that “Champagne flew high into the air in Swaziland while the nation was laying to rest its heroes”. Meanwhile the Caretaker Council sent a statement to the British High Commissioner “expressing shock and disgust at the Lesoma massacre and accused the British of avoiding effective and positive measures of bringing down the illegal regime in Salisbury”.⁶⁸ Perhaps it should be pointed out that among these students were those who had fled the Rhodesian regime or Portuguese rule in Mozambique into Botswana and were conscious of the developments in the liberation struggle. According to Alice Hamiwe in

62 BDF, “Lesoma Ambush”, p. 20.

63 *Daily News*, 1 March 1978.

64 *Daily News*, 3 March 1978.

65 *Daily News*, 6 March 1978.

66 Later Dean of Social Sciences and Deputy Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs at the University of Botswana.

67 *Daily News*, 10 March 1978.

68 B Seboni, E Dewah, M Chakalisa and A Skosana (Caretaker Council Members) to the British High Commissioner, *Daily News*, 10 March and 13 March 1978.

1976/1977 the SRC president was a Mozambique citizen called Carlos V Camino.⁶⁹ Although Hamiwe writes that the SRC was quite conscious and vocal on the regional political developments in the 1970s she does not say anything on the reaction of this student body on the Lesoma ambush. Some ordinary Batswana from all over the country called for the stepping up of the struggle against the Rhodesian regime.⁷⁰

The university students had established what they called 'Border Relief Fund' in January 1977 as an emergency relief fund to help the victims of the war along north-eastern border.⁷¹ Their example led to the Lesoma ambush generating great patriotism and desire to lend a helping hand to the parents of the Lesoma victims. In Molepolole the residents formed Supporting Committee for the Botswan Defence Force which collected P90.92 and one goat as compensation for the parents and relatives of the ambushed soldiers and civilians.⁷² More *matsbidiso* ("condolence funds") donations for the parents of the deceased poured in from various quarters in the country. On 5 April 1978 Lieutenant Rebakaa Mabua of the BDF received P61.54 from the Botswana Government Printing Department Union on behalf of the parents of those who perished in the Lesoma ambush. Other contributors included:

Messers M.L. Hardy [of] Gaborone P15.00, Gaborone Meat Centre - P100.00, Notwane Farm Workers -P8.00, Sister and staff of St. Joseph [College] -P12.00, Apostolic Zion Church Tonota -P20.00. There are two letters one from Ghanzi District Commissioner Mr David Maganu which contained P193.71 from Ghanzi residents another from Francistown District Commissioner Ambrose Masalila which contained P60.15 from three organisations in the Francistown area. The organisations are Woman's World Day of Prayer, Motobo Village Community and Mapoka Village Community.

Many more contributions were made in the subsequent period.⁷³ The Kazungula border was opened on 22 March for humanitarian reasons for a period of ten days for only four hours following a request from the South African government. The reopening applied only to a backlog of South African trucks carrying food and medical supplies for the Caprivi Strip in

69 AI Hamiwe, "Aspects of the history of the Student Representative Councils of the University of Botswana, 1976-1995"(BA research essay, University of Botswana, 2003), p. 18.

70 BF Madiabaso (Sefhare), "Let us fight to the last nan", *Daily News*, 13 March 1978; WN Chube (Nswazwi), "Smith regime can only be eliminated thru' barrel of gun", *Daily News*, 13 March 1978; B Matenge (Tshane), "Fighting against regime must continue", *Daily News*, 13 March 1978.

71 *Daily News*, 20 January 1977.

72 *Daily News*, 14 March 1978.

73 *Daily News*, 20 April 1978.

South West Africa (Namibia).⁷⁴ Nonetheless, the Rhodesian forces continued abducting and killing Batswana. For instance, it was reported that in the afternoon of 27 April 1978 two Batswana women, Sidondo Tadubana and Selebatso Tadubana from Ntemane near Moroka village, who were last seen alive while working on their fields close to the Rhodesian border, were shot and killed by the Rhodesian forces. Their bodies were collected from the Rhodesian Police in Plumtree (Rhodesia) for burial in Botswana.⁷⁵ The insecurity on the Botswana-Rhodesia border area continued during the talks between Smith and the liberation movement groups which eventually led to the first truly democratic election in Zimbabwe and independence in 1980. The Lesoma ambush was described by the Commander of the BDF, Major-General Merefhe as a 'serious setback in the history of the army'.⁷⁶

Conclusion

This article has attempted to document a hitherto neglected aspect of the history of the liberation struggle in Southern Africa. From a mere token army improvised out of a desperate and emergency situation of the Zimbabwean liberation war the BDF has grown into one of the most disciplined and respected armies in Africa. It has over the years earned itself an admirable reputation of being apolitical locally and the civil military relations in Botswana has been a commendable one.⁷⁷ It has become the pride of the nation, its symbol of foreign policy and a defender of the country's enduring democracy, the oldest on the African continent. The army has been involved in numerous tasks locally and these include anti-poaching campaign, charitable cause, crime prevention and control alongside with the police force, rescue from disasters and many others. So positive has been the image of the BDF that it commands unqualified respect from the citizens across the board and has become a highly trusted institution in the country. Therefore, the BDF has played a crucial role in the maintenance or sustenance of Botswana's enduring and uninterrupted liberal democratic dispensation. The BDF has also impressed in peace-keeping missions in troubled countries such as Somalia and Mozambique.

⁷⁴ *Daily News*, 23 March 1978.

⁷⁵ *Daily News*, May 1978; *Daily News*, 2 May 1978; *Daily News*, 10 May 1978.

⁷⁶ *Daily News*, 7 June 1978.

⁷⁷ TE Malebeswa, "Civil control and the military in Botswana", R Williams, G Cawthra and D Abrahams, *Ourselves to know: Civil-military relations and defence transformation in southern Africa* (Pretoria, Institute for Security Studies, 2003), pp. 67-80.

During South African Defence Force (SADF) cross-border raids in Botswana between 1985 and 1990⁷⁸ the BDF in an effort to deal with the SADF intimidation came into conflict with some sections of the public.⁷⁹ However, the transition to a democratic rule in South Africa restored the cordial relations between the BDF and the public in Botswana. The end of apartheid in South Africa in 1994 meant that Botswana had to recast her foreign policy in line with new realities in the region and globally.⁸⁰ This involved being part of the United Nations, Africa Union or Southern African Development Community (SADC) training and cooperation exercises for counter-terrorism and peace-keeping missions among others. An important post-apartheid military cooperation in Southern Africa was a joint BDF and South African Defence Force (SADF) peace-keeping mission in Lesotho in 1998.

78 R Dale, 'Not always so placid a place: Botswana under attack', *African Affairs*, 86 (342), 1987, pp. 73-91.

79 L Kenosi, 'The Botswana Defence Force and public trust: the military dilemma in a democracy', Williams, Cawthra et al, *Ourselves to know*, pp. 190-192.

80 ML Fisher, 'New threats and new roles for the military' (Paper, African Centre of Strategic Studies conference, Role of the Military in Democratization: A Southern African Perspective, Gaborone, 18 June 1996); D Henk, 'The Botswana Defence Force: Evolution of a professional African army', *African Security Review*, 13(4), 2003, pp. 86-99; GA Sekgoma, 'New dimensions in Botswana's foreign policy', Edge and Lekorwe, *Botswana*, pp. 477-486.