

Mozambique carries brave banner through crises

BY MICHAEL HOLMAN FT 4/3/83

"AFRICA será livre," declares the stencilled slogan on the warehouse of Maputo docks where fishing trawlers from Spain, Italy and the Soviet Union lie alongside.

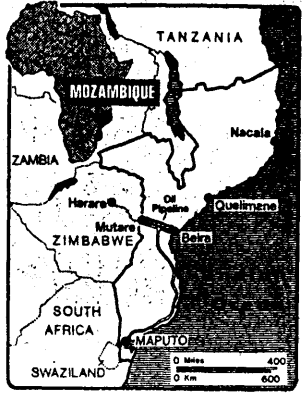
It is a brave message. But a visitor to Mozambique these days comes away feeling that an appeal for practical help might be more appropriate than the slogans of liberation.

A devastating drought has left the country facing its worst food crisis for 50 years, affecting a quarter of the 12m people.

On the security front, nine of the 10 provinces are affected to varying degrees by the Mozambique National Resistance (MNR) movement which seeks to overthrow the government of President Samora Machel. On the economic front, balance of payments deficits have been widening from an estimated \$286m in 1979 to \$319m in 1981. There is no early prospect of the trend changing.

It is a far cry from the optimistic mood in Maputo in 1980 when President Samora Machel toasted Lord Soames in "Socialist" champagne and spoke glowingly of the role Rhodesia's last governor played in the transition to Zimbabwe.

The independence of neighbouring Zimbabwe meant the end of two wars for Mozambique: one waged by Rhodesian



forces who crossed the border to hit guerrilla camps, road and rail bridges and other installations, the other by the MNR, launched and backed from Salisbury, who carried out hit and run attacks which added to economic and social dislocation.

It also meant the reopening of Mozambique's border with Zimbabwe, closed since 1976 despite the loss of much needed rail and harbour fees.

The Southern Africa Development Co-ordination Conference (SADCC) was about to be launched, and the nine member states seeking to reduce trade and transport links with South Africa agreed that massive investment in Mozambique ports and railways was the first and most important step.

But it was not to be. South Africa put its resources behind the MNR — a fact widely acknowledged in private by diplomats, and publicly stated by a U.S. State Department official earlier this year, much to Pretoria's fury—and the the organisation is now a potential threat to the country's stability.

It has perhaps 3,000 men under arms according to officials in Maputo, with several thousand more—both volunteers and conscripts—acting as porters, food suppliers and informants, all under the leadership of Afonso Dhlakama. It appeals to tribal differences, promises chiefs that their former powers will be restored, and recruits among disaffected members of Frelimo, the ruling party.

Its main targets have been the railways, road traffic, the oil pipeline carrying Zimbabwe's fuel supplies between Beira and Mutare (formerly Umtali) and expatriates working on development projects.

The net result is that SADCC's hopes to open up the transport routes through Mozambique have been seriously undermined, the 25,000-strong Mozambican army is finding it increasingly difficult effectively to police a territory of some 783,000 sq km and economic activity in many parts of the

countryside is disrupted.

Sections of the main road between Maputo and Beira—the only south-north route—are impassable without military escort. Beira itself, where electricity and water installations, marker buoys in the harbours, the oil storage depot, and a major bridge on the road inland have all been attacked at various stages, is sometimes like a town under siege.

The nature of the MNR propaganda, broadcast from a transmitter thought to be in South Africa's northern Transvaal province, has changed over the years from crude anti-Communist rhetoric to something more sophisticated.

It portrays the organisation as representing the "real" Frelimo, following in the footsteps of Eduardo Mondlane, the late founder and first president of the country's ruling party.

The broadcasts also make much of the high proportion of Mozambicans of Indian or Portuguese origin in government and state institutions, suggesting that it is this group of radicals who have pushed Mozambique towards Moscow.

At the same time much is made of daily hardships experienced in Mozambique — the shortage of basic commodities and the run-down industrial and commercial sectors, separately short of foreign

exchange for raw materials and spare parts.

Economic performance since independence in 1976 has indeed been poor.

The exodus of some 200,000 Portuguese, many taking cars, trucks and equipment with them, the Rhodesian war, and a succession of floods and droughts have combined with shortcomings in policy-making and planning.

The critical area is agriculture, where cashew nuts and cashew oil, cotton, sugar and tea are the main export earners.

Mozambique has not been self sufficient in food since independence. The country's annual cereal requirement, mainly for the 2m urban dwellers, is around 515,000 tonnes of which local production in a normal year can supply 180,000.

In 1983, however, the crippling drought which has lasted two years in some places, has cut local production to 115,000 tonnes, and rice production in the Limpopo Valley—the main growing area—has virtually collapsed.

One of the rare encouraging economic developments is the opening of bidding for oil exploration rights to 17 offshore blocks. But even the most optimistic forecasts put commercial production at five or more years away.