Harnessing the power of the Zambezi

By MARTIN SPRING

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The Cabora Bassa project, which involves harnessing the Zambezi for hydro-electric power generation and crop irrigation at the Kebrabasa Gorge, near Tete, where the river plunges down off the Central African plateau on to the East African coastal plain, is not only enormously important to Mozambique—it also represents a major step towards economic and political co-ordination in Southern Africa.

The potential of the Zambezi at Kebrabasa has long been realised—the river's head is enough to generate 4,000 MW, equal to two giant coalburning power stations or two-and-a-half Kariba—and the Portuguese Ministry for Overseas Affairs spent the equivalent of $5m. just on investigating it.

But exploitation of this potential required an enormous amount of capital—the first two stages of the project are likely to call for $1.5bn—and it was out of the question unless a big customer could be found for hydro-electricity on a long-term basis, so that there would be an assured source of revenue to service the loans which would have to be raised.

Interestingly enough, the gran-diose idea only became a prac-tical project when Dr. Henrique Van Eck, chairman of South Africa's Industrial Development Corporation and the most powerful industrialist in the Republic, got very interested.

Van Eck is a potent combination of visionary and practical businessman, and when he sets his heart on a venture it nearly always comes off.

Eye-catching

He saw Cabora Bassa as an eye-catching opportunity to strengthen the ties between South Africa and Mozambique—nothing stronger in the past because of the backwardness of Mozambique's economy or South Africa's disdain for the Portuguese and the African economic imperialism. Stronger economic and political ties between the territories of Southern Africa are very much part of the idea of creating a sort of looseknot South African confederation to be led by the Republic.

Through van Eck's interven-tion South Africa's Electricity Generating Board, a Commission in Mozambique of 100 MW of the higher total.

The agreement is for 35 years. The exact price at which ESCOM will buy is still confidential, but it is known more than the Commission now charges to consumers for supply of coagulated power—three- to fourfold a unit.

Of course, coal costs have been rising steadily and are likely to rise still more. This introduces the opportunity for holding down costs through going in for larger production units and in a go-ahead manner. ESCOM is turning towards more costly water-conserving "dry" stations—where the diverted water is being forced towards larger production units are dictates so that ESCOM can still finance the project by hydro-electricity on a long-term basis, so that there would be an assured source of revenue to service the loans which would have to be raised.

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