

The Cabora Bassa Stockade

By A Special Correspondent

The massive Cabora Bassa dam now being built in Portuguese Mozambique provokes some strong passions. For its many opponents across the world it is a concrete symbol of white racialist determination to retain power in southern Africa.

South Africa has come north from her natural defence line to help build the dam, pay the lion's share of its cost and take most of the electricity it will produce, while Mozambique and Rhodesia will gain much mutual benefit from the grandiose development scheme of which the dam is the vital core.

Cabora Bassa also demonstrates which side of Africa's racial split Western capitalists feel their interests lie. Despite Kenneth Kaunda's denunciation of Cabora Bassa as 'a crime against humanity' and many other international protests, French, German and Italian firms (and subsidiaries of British ones) have drawn together to take part in the work.

A visitor to this bulwark of modern-day colonialism might be forgiven for expecting to find a world of ungodly solidarity, one which brought alive in human form the tableau of multi-national capital joining hands with white supremacy. In fact, though, solidarity is in short supply at Cabora Bassa. To spend two weeks inside the embattled community which is building the dam is to live in a seething atmosphere of conflict and division.

At the centre of the Portuguese Army's triple rings of defence, established to hold off the Frelimo guerrillas who have sworn to destroy the dam, sits Songo Township. On a plateau 600 metres above the dam site on the Zambesi river, and overlooking the black labour compound, Songo is home for all Cabora Bassa's white workers. The offices of the South African-led construction consortium, ZAMCO, and of the Portuguese authorities who oversee their work, are both there. But contractor and customer are two miles apart.

'Who else but the bloody Portuguese would make themselves so inaccessible?' complained an exasperated South African engineer. ZAMCO men seem to spend most of their days fuming about the Portuguese, who are quite blithe about the frayed nerves they cause. They insist that all official communication should be in Portuguese; after all it's their country and their dam.

The multi-lingual administrative assistant at ZAMCO has his desk covered with translations of memos between the German, French, and English-speaking members of the consortium. 'That's work enough,' he cries, 'but whenever something has to be referred to the Portuguese, I've got to work on it all over again.'

Away from their desks and drills, the South Africans have a considerable scorn for their clients on a personal and (perhaps inevitably) a racial level. The township manager, Clem Gething, who showed me round Songo with a proprietary flourish, considers the Portuguese to be 'worse than kaffirs'.

Many of the South Africans object to the lax way that the Portuguese treat Mozambique's indigenous black population. One night in the township's social club, a Portuguese surveyor brought in his new, black, wife to be greeted by a ripple of dismay along the rowdy tables of Afrikaaners. Forks were dropped, fingers were pointed, and broad muscular backs were turned. The couple sat to eat in silence.

The community is afflicted by a heavy claustrophobic mood. They cannot travel out of Songo except on a twice-daily military convoy, for which special permits are needed. It runs the gauntlet of regular Frelimo attacks to the provincial capital of Tete, 140 miles away.

There is also a six-seater aeroplane service, but it is expensive and at this time of year is frequently cut off by heavy rains.

Frelimo's liberation of large areas of Mozambique is keenly felt, especially by the many big-game hunters among the South African contingent, who are not

allowed to venture out to indulge their hobby.

Clem Gething recently got himself into trouble with the Portuguese for openly complaining that perhaps he should apply to Frelimo for a hunting licence. Songo's very functional-looking bars are continually well attended, and frustration often spills over into violence.

The Yukon gold-rush atmosphere might have been muted a little by the settling of wives and children along with many workers. But in fact this hopefully steady move has brought its own problems.

Single men have their own quarters, long low huts divided into cubicle-sized units usually shared between two. They form an irksome contrast with the family houses, which range from the A-type (luxurious) to the C-type (roughly equivalent to a small bungalow).

Social facilities are separate, as well, and much of the security guards' energy is taken up ensuring that the bachelors, who often work night shifts and spend aimless days in the sun, keep to their own swimming pool and do not chat up their colleagues' wives.

An earnest South African Calvinism permeates the administration of the township despite its international population, and whenever a prostitute is found to have slipped in (usually by favouring a pilot or convoy driver) she is very promptly frown out.

With so much internal strife to occupy everyone, Cabora Bassa demonstrates little obvious nervousness about the external threat from Frelimo.

Portuguese troops are seen loitering round the township with little to do. Obviously the military emphasis is placed out in the bush, with Chief of Staff Gen Kaulza di Arriaga's much-vaunted 'three circles of defence'.

Not that the civilians have great faith in the Portuguese Army. Rhodesians and South Africans express a ribald contempt ('half-pissed peasants, most of them') which roughly reflects the official concern felt in their home countries.

There have been frequent

high-level talks involving the security services of all three white States, and towards the end of last year Portugal's Prime Minister had to rebuke Ian Smith for spreading alarm about the military situation in Mozambique. (Peter Niesewand's detention was originally prompted by a story he wrote which reported Frelimo attacks on the railway line for Cabora Bassa supplies.)

The frequent response from Cabora Bassa workers to international criticism—from those, that is, who rationalise their position beyond saying they are only in it for the money—is to present the project as one benefiting both black and white populations.

The Germans particularly are fond of this line, and a group of Siemens engineers insisted, the dam is neutral. Once it is built it is there for enriching whoever runs the country, blacks or Portuguese. Their belief in heavy industrialisation as the ideal development for a poor country, is matched by a similar confidence in their own safety as foreigners.

The theory that Frelimo has abandoned its aim of destroying the dam has circulated widely this year, but the Frelimo office in Dar-es-Salaam refute it strongly.

Joaquim Chissano, in charge of Frelimo's headquarters in Tanzania, uncompromisingly regards Cabora Bassa as a non-transferable cog in the Portuguese machine of exploitation and repression. To leave the dam alone, he says, would be like ignoring a Portuguese military HQ 'because we might need the building after independence'. He insists their attack will come in their own time and in their own way. 'We will measure the sacrifices which are necessary. We will not go as adventurers, we know what to do'.

Does Frelimo include civilian workers among its targets?

'We are not going to give letters to our bullets to say that is so and so, don't kill him. The people who are involved in building Cabora Bassa are the same as the soldier who is involved in the war against us.'

The builders of Cabora Bassa, already far from being a happy community, may yet have their nerves even further frayed.—By arrangement with New Statesman.