

Maputo tries to foil ration cheats

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From Joseph Hanlon
in Maputo

Maputo's new rationing system has become the centre of a fight between the Government and shopkeepers.

The system cut queues and black marketeering, but also cut profits from backdoor trading. Now shopkeepers are trying to cheat on the ration system. Government officials also claim that some disgruntled traders are trying to create artificial shortages in an attempt to stir public discontent.

Every family in Maputo has a ration card giving it the right to buy a fixed amount of grain, sugar, soap, and cooking oil at a low fixed price. Each family is assigned to their consumer cooperative or to a neighbourhood private shop, and these outlets receive just enough of the rationed pro-

ducts to sell to those with cards.

Previously each shop received an allocation of items in short supply, but it immediately went out of the back door and onto the black market. Official prices include a profit margin, but it is much less than can be made on black market dealing.

There have been arguments since rationing began in March. Children are entitled to full rations, but the Office to Organise Maputo Supply, which controls the rationing, soon received widespread complaints of shopkeepers telling their customers that small children were entitled to only a half ration or none at all. Left over supplies were then sold on the black market.

Another ploy was to say that not enough food had been supplied by the wholesaler. But in the borough named "25th of June" local women investi-

gated and found that one merchant had "lost" eight sacks of sugar and one of rice between the warehouse and his shop.

The Office to Organise Maputo Supply has set up monitoring offices to try to control corruption. Last week it published a list of 45 traders caught recently for selling at inflated prices and for black marketeering.

Another area of conflict is bread, which is always in limited supply because all wheat is imported. State-owned bakeries in Maputo were sold to private traders last year, who increasingly diverted flour to produce cakes, which carry a higher profit margin, or to sell it on the black market. It has now been announced that, starting in July, most bread will be distributed through consumer cooperatives and to schools and other institutions.