

Hope flickers in Maputo

City Press 31 MAR 1991

JULIETA Ngomane used to be constantly harassed by the Mozambican police, but not any longer – maybe because she always returned for more of the same.

For Julieta is one of thousands of Mozambican women dependant on street trade for the survival of themselves and their family.

Today a shopper can find a wide range of goods – from hens to Portuguese wines and even hi-fi systems – along the dusty, potholed roads in the more populous and poorer parts of the city.

Julietta, an elderly widow who used to be a farmer, spends her days sweating over a heap of burning charcoal roasting mealies on the cob to sell to passersby for 400 meticals (about 95 cents).

"I have just enough money to survive," said Ngomane, who lives with eight family members in her brother's house.

This is the third year that Ngomane has been selling on the streets,

after fleeing from her farm in Homoine, in the southern province of Inhambane, following an attack by Mozambique National Resistance (Renamo) rebels.

Ngomane's husband was killed by Renamo two years ago while he was on his way to the farm to fetch produce to sell in Maputo.

The hundreds of thousands of peasants who flock to the relative safety of Mozambique's cities are confronted with a housing crisis, rising unemployment, crowded hospitals, full schools and rocketing cost of living.

Many people have to resort to the informal sector to make ends meet, even schoolchildren.

Zefania Samuel, 16, left school two years ago to help his grandmother sell petroleum on the roadside. "There are days when we don't sell anything, but sometime we can make 20 000 meticals a month (R55)," he said.

Samuel would like to follow his three older brothers to work in the

mines in neighbouring South Africa.

"Here I don't eat well, but in South Africa I have the chance of a secure job."

An estimated 40 000 Mozambican men come to South Africa to make "their fortune".

Unskilled labour is cheap in Mozambique, and the informal sector, while less secure, can bring in more money.

Adelia Fernando, who sells rice, sugar and beer at a market stall, sometimes earns more than the 30 000 meticals (R83) monthly wage her husband is paid as a factory worker. But even if she makes 40 000 meticals (R110), their joint monthly earnings of 70 000 meticals (R193), do not stretch far for their family of five children.

While prices have risen – inflation is officially at 30 percent – the metical, the national currency, has undergone huge devaluation.

In 1987 there were 40 meticals to the US dollar at the official exchange rate whereas today there are

1 047.

Finance Minister Abdul Osman has promised, however, that in the next phase of Mozambique's economic and social recovery programme – started this year and sponsored by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank – there will be no further "violent" devaluations of the metical.

At least 60 percent of the population lives in absolute poverty.

The economy, bolstered artificially by international aid, has grown in recent years. But economic output is just one-third of what it was in 1974, a year before independence from Portuguese colonial rule.

About 85 percent of Mozambique's 15 million people are farmers, but the war has laid waste to much of the country's fertile land. Frequent sabotage of the power lines by the rebels, particularly last year, has disrupted industrial production.

Hopes for the future lie in a peace settlement. -- AIA