

Mozambique's breadbasket faces hunger

By Paul Fauvet

ULONGUE (Mozambique).

FOR the first time ever, the Angonia plateau, in Mozambique's north-western province of Tete, is facing hunger.

This emergency has nothing to do with the weather. Angonia is blessed with some of the best conditions for agricultural production in the country. It has abundant rainfall, fertile soils, and a climate temperate enough to grow fruits such as apples, peaches and strawberries.

In the past Angonia supplied maize, potatoes, fruit and meat not only to the rest of Tete, but also to Maputo and other urban centres.

Not any more. South African-sponsored banditry has turned Angonia from a breadbasket into a wasteland.

The giant state farm that once dominated the plateau's economy, the Angonia agro-industrial complex (known by the acronym Caia — not to be confused with the town in Sofala province of the same name) is effectively dead.

"Caia is paralysed," says the Angonia district administrator, Cde Alberto Zacarias. "All the installations have been completely destroyed."

South African-backed MNR bandits, operating out of Malawi, have attacked the state farm nine times since 1984. The eighth and ninth raids, earlier this year, finally wrecked the complex. Millions of dollars worth of imported equipment — tractors and combine harvesters, for instance — was destroyed. Maize and potatoes had been planted, but it was impossible to harvest them, and the crops rot in the fields.

The Caia management and most of the workforce escaped,

and are currently in the provincial capital, Tete City.

Peasant family agriculture in Angonia has also been disrupted. "People are constantly on the move," says Cde Zacarias, "and so agriculture becomes impossible."

MNR attacks have turned Angonia's peasants into nomads. Some have escaped the war by fleeing over the border into Malawi. The district administration knows of 20 000 people (10 per cent of the district's population) who have crossed the border, and fears that the real figure may be higher.

There is practically nothing left in the warehouses in the district capital, Ulongue. The people here are largely dependent on food supplies from the Tete branch of the Disasters Control Office (DPCCN). But the road from Tete City to Ulongue is too dangerous to travel, and so the DPCCN's food enters via Malawi.

The road from Ulongue to the border is about 20 km long and is relatively safe.

But Mozambican officials in Ulongue complain that the Malawians charge high insurance fees (in their own currency) for trucks travelling into Mozambique. DPCCN-Tete is short of the cash to pay them. "The Malawians are deliberately making it difficult to get food in," accuses Cde Zacarias.

The last consignment to arrive in Ulongue was just one truck carrying 140 sacks of maize and a quantity of soap. 50 000 people — a quarter of Angonia's population — are now in or around Ulongue, and when I was there, the administration had not yet figured out how to distribute such a small quantity of food among so many people.

The previous consignment, which arrived in March, provided

enough maize flour to give each family half a sack each.

Fields in the immediate vicinity of the town provide some relief, and occasionally families try to harvest something from semi-abandoned fields further away. But they only do this when accompanied by an armed escort.

The obvious alternative for Ulongue is an airlift, which would be expensive but safe. The town possesses a reliable airstrip.

On the outskirts of the town a new suburb is springing up. Cde Luciano Culinji, a Frelimo central committee member who lives in Ulongue, explains that many of those building houses here have been displaced by the war. Many have returned after weeks or months of exile in Malawi.

One of the returnees, Cde Sani Canalo, took his wife and four children into Malawi to escape MNR attacks, and ended up in a large refugee camp at Neheu. He stayed for a month, but found life in the camp miserable. "There wasn't enough food there," he complains, "and there were difficulties with clothing and health." And so in June the family made their way to Ulongue.

There is a clear attempt to return to something approaching normality in the new suburb. Livestock is being reared (both cows and pigs), and a new well has been dug. For food the families have relied partly on their own nearby fields, and partly on previous DPCCN distributions.

The administration is urgently seeking not only food, clothing and medicines, but also seeds, hoes, machetes and other agricultural handtools, so that, even under difficult circumstances, people in and around Ulongue can make this fertile land produce. — Ziana-AIM-Pana.