



# Hunger drives Mozambicans across Eastern border

DROUGHT and fear of attacks by bandits of the National Resistance Movement of Mozambique (MNR) are driving thousands of people across the border into Zimbabwe's Eastern Districts.

Estimates of the number of people fleeing into Zimbabwe vary with some aid agencies putting the figure as high as 30 000. According to the latest issue of *Refugees*, a magazine published by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, there are 20 000 Mozambican refugees in Zimbabwe.

The main cause of the exodus of people from Mozambique seems to be hunger.

The 1983 drought has become the greatest disaster to hit Mozambique since the country became independent in 1975. The whole of Mozambique south of the Zambezi was affected, but the worse damage was done in the three southernmost provinces (Inhambane, Gaza and Maputo) where most of the crops were simply wiped out.

Nobody knows exactly how many people have lost their lives in the disaster. Officials (including President Samora Machel himself) speak of "tens of thousands" of deaths from starvation. Thousands of other victims are concentrated in improvised relief centres, where international food aid is being channelled. Yet others, particularly from Gaza and Tete provinces, have fled over the border into Zimbabwe in search of food.

In the country as a whole, the government estimates that over four and a half million people (more than a third of the population) are affected to a greater or lesser extent by the drought. A very substantial proportion of these are threatened by famine, especially in the two worst-hit provinces of Gaza and Inhambane.

In Inhambane about half a million people are "seriously affected", and in Gaza, over a quarter of a million. In two districts in Inhambane (Vilanculos and Govuro) and one in Gaza (Chicualacuala) 90 percent of the population is "seriously affected". What this means is that these people are at risk of acute malnutrition leading to death, either through outright starvation, or from a variety of diseases (diarrhoea, malaria, pneumonia etc.) that strike down those whose natural defences have been severely weakened. The malnourished are in no condition to resist even the slightest infection. As usual in famine situations, it is young children who are most at risk.

It is, of course, tempting to regard what has happened in Gaza and Inhambane as just bad luck — a natural disaster that nobody can do very much about. And while it is true that in some of the drought zones it has scarcely rained for four years, it would be seriously misleading to blame the famine in southern Mozambique on the weather.

During Zimbabwe's liberation struggle, thousands of people fled from this country into Mozambique. But with the war in Zimbabwe at an end, the situation has been reversed with thousands of Mozambicans fleeing the drought and harassment from MNR bandits. MOTO's Leonard Maveneke and Paul Fauvet in Maputo report.



For these two women from Mozambique, Zimbabwe offers the last hope for survival from famine.

In general, famine has a social dimension: the effects of natural disasters can be compounded by political disturbances or government policies. The catastrophe that has hit the peasants of Gaza and Inhambane is a combination of drought and war. It is the

result just as much of the activities of the South African backed rebels of the "Mozambique National Resistance" (MNR) as it is of the failure of the rains. In drought zones unaffected by the MNR (such as the district of Moamba, in Maputo province),

there have been very few deaths from starvation.

The MNR has been active in Gaza and Inhambane for the past two years or so. Their impact has been particularly devastating in Inhambane where they effectively destroyed the province's entire transport and trading network. Over 400 rural shops in the province were burnt down by the MNR — that left only two shops, outside the main towns, functioning in the whole of Inhambane.

Travel along Gaza and Inhambane roads became a hazardous exercise. Mines on dirt roads and ambushes on tarred ones took a dreadful toll of buses, lorries and other vehicles. The Ministry of Domestic Trade alone has lost some 30 lorries, burnt out by the MNR, in the two provinces. Other state bodies, and private businessmen alike have also seen their precious vehicles go up in flames.

Obviously this had repercussions on the distribution of food. Consignments of food meant for the people's consumption were stolen by the MNR, or simply destroyed along with the lorries in which they were being carried.

Any food reserves that peasants had saved from pre-drought harvests were also taken by the MNR at gunpoint. Herds of livestock in Gaza and Inhambane were decimated, more to feed the MNR, than from the direct effects of drought.

The scale of the disaster in Inhambane only became fully evident in the wake of

Mozambican military victories in the provinces. In June the Mozambican army (FPLM) launched a major offensive in Inhambane. This achieved its most important success on August 23, when the MNR headquarters for all southern Mozambique, at a place called Tome, was captured. It was here that MNR commanders conferred with South African officers who had been parachuted into the base. Here too South African planes regularly dropped military equipment to be distributed to other MNR camps throughout the province.

The immediate effect of the FPLM offensive was to liberate parts of Inhambane which had effectively been under MNR control. It was here that the Mozambican troops encountered appalling scenes of mass destitution: thousands of peasants had lost all their possessions and, in order to survive, were forced to grub for wild fruits, nuts and roots of dubious nutritional value.

As relief centres were opened, so a stream of starving people moved towards them from the interior. Many could not survive journeys of 100 kilometres or more, and died before they could reach assistance. Others arrived at the centres in such a weakened and emaciated condition that there was little the medical personnel there could do for them, and they too perished.

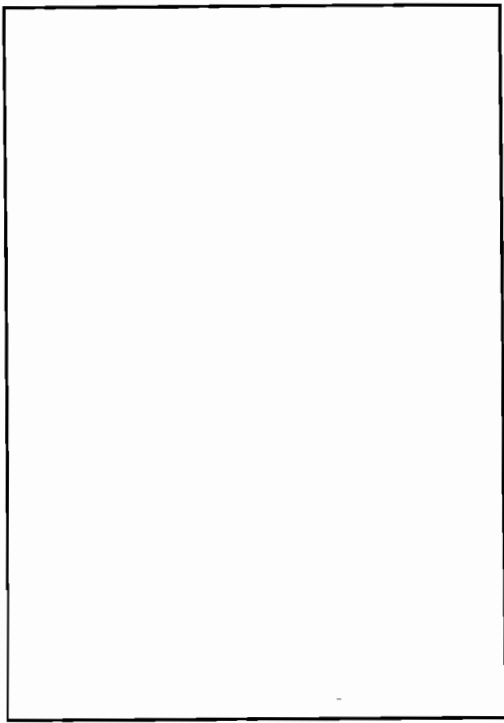
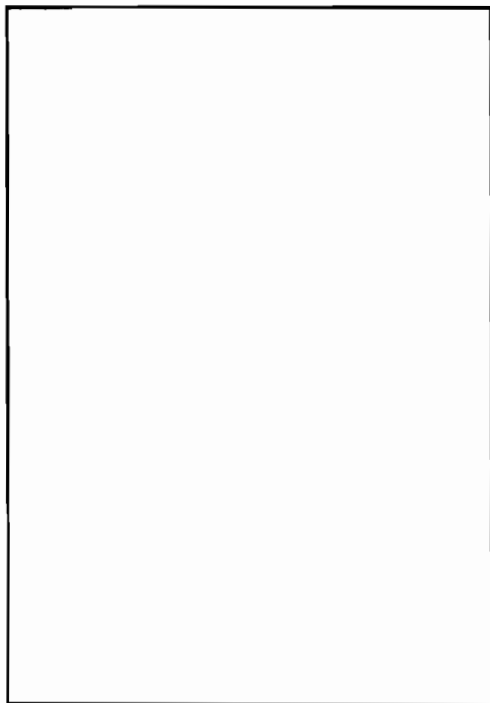
International food aid is now reaching the relief centres on or near the Inhambane coast regularly. A boat provided by the World Food Programme is carrying food to the small ports of Vilanculos, Inhassouro and

Mambone. Transporting the aid into the interior remains a problem, however, both because of the continued risk of ambush by MNR groups, and because of the sheer lack of vehicles. This latter problem should be resolved when 21 giant Scania trucks, pledged by Sweden, arrive.

International food aid to Mozambique in 1983 amounted to 232 420 tonnes of cereals (maize, rice and wheat). Of this total, perhaps the most striking gift was 25 000 tonnes of maize offered by Zimbabwe, despite its own drought problems. The largest offers came from the United States (33 000 tonnes), and the European Economic Community (57 000 tonnes).

Mozambique will continue to need food aid until at least April, when the next harvest is due. So far, 170 000 tonnes have been pledged, but it is not at all clear that this will all arrive in good time. Even if it does, the Ministry of Domestic Trade estimates that this will still leave a food deficit of at least 100 000 tonnes. Mozambique's dramatic shortage of foreign exchange makes it extremely difficult for the country to resort to straightforward commercial purchases of grain. Thus the situation for the immediate future remains precarious.

By early January, reports from the centres on the Inhambane coast could confirm that the mortality rate had dropped substantially. Whereas in November around 15 deaths a day had been reported, the figure was now down to less than one a day. But in areas where relief centres have not yet been estab-





Mozambican women harvesting a maize crop — but for the last three years, continued drought has meant that very little was harvested.

lished, the daily paper *Noticias* remarked that matters were still "deplorable". Health Minister Pascoal Mocumbi visited the centres in the first week of January, and told the press that the most urgent problems they now faced was a shortage of water and of medicines.

As mentioned before, a disturbing trend resulting from Mozambique's catastrophe has been the exodus of affected people into the border areas of Zimbabwe, and in some cases, the interior areas as well.

Although displaced people coming into Zimbabwe from Mozambique have been from areas south of the Zambezi, the greatest influx seems to be from areas which were either affected by the MNR or never benefitted from reconstruction after destruction during the Smith regime's raids into Mozambique.

The extent of the problems faced by displaced Mozambicans in Zimbabwe is difficult to assess because there are no fixed

settlements where they live. Their status too seems not clarified by the Zimbabwean authorities. As long as they are classified as drought victims, they will not qualify for refugee status.

According to the Refugee Act 1983, only people fleeing from their country for fear of persecution on the grounds of "race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion" qualify for refugee status, or those who flee owing to "external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order".

From what has been mentioned earlier in the article, displaced people fleeing into Zimbabwe can qualify for refugee status because although they are fleeing from the drought, Frelimo's inability to effect drought relief measures in the areas affected is largely due to the problems which are the direct result of the MNR. The destruction of

roads and other transport facilities has meant that even when the food was available, the Mozambican Government has not been able to bring it to the people.

While ordinary peasants in the Eastern Districts of Zimbabwe are quite willing to share the little food they have with displaced people from Mozambique, this can be a strain on the family's food resources as no particular provisions have been made for those who have taken in Mozambicans to stay with.

The problem is even more acute in areas which do not get drought relief. An example is the Mount Selinda Mission area which was divided into plots. The plot holders do not qualify for drought relief because the area is not classified as communal land. An influx of displaced people from Mozambique who settled on the plots has placed a strain not only on the plot holders, but also on the Mission Hospital.

According to an official of Oxfam UK who visited the Mount Selinda hospital recently, a programme started to combat malnutrition in the area whereby mothers were taught nutrition patterns and then sent home to practise them, is floundering because malnourished children who have been treated often come back to the hospital because of lack of resources to follow the programme up.

Efforts at repatriation by both the Zimbabwean and Mozambican authorities have met with limited success partly because the people do not live in groups and partly because they can always slip back into the country. Although suffering from the effects of drought themselves, local people are very sympathetic towards people from Mozambique because of the strong bonds created during Zimbabwe's liberation struggle and to some extent because they realise that the problems these people are faced with are a direct result of their supporting Zimbabwe's liberation struggle.

To avoid repatriation, some displaced people have moved as far from the border as they could and found employment on farms or among the local people. What seems to be worrying people particularly those working on commercial farms is that because of the desperate situation these people are in when they arrive in Zimbabwe, they ask only for food and shelter in return for their services. While this might be a boon for farmers in those areas, this is upsetting the government's wage structures. No farmer would pay the minimum wage if he can get cheap labour.

However not all people crossing the border into Zimbabwe come to stay. Even before the war, there has always been interaction between people in this country and Mozambique. The drought and the war has increased this significantly with victims coming in to barter goats and chickens in return for mealie meal. Because of the lack of health facilities in some of the border areas of Mozambique, some also come for medical treatment.

The problem of displaced people from Mozambique is likely to persist even if the current drought ends — unless of course South Africa stops giving support to MNR bandits who have so far managed to disrupt development in areas they operate in.