

Mozambique

First we need food

In the province of Tete, the rains have failed for three consecutive years. Chronic hunger is widespread. But efforts to bring in food and relief by train and truck are constantly disrupted in a countryside wracked by civil disturbance. By LINDSEY HILSUM.

"I try to encourage mothers to breast-feed, but the mothers who come to me are so malnourished they have no milk in their breasts. I try to teach nutrition, but they just laugh at me. I say: 'Give your children beans,' and they ask me: 'When was the last time we saw beans around here?'" So says Kate Gingell, a British volunteer doctor responsible for mother and child health in the northern Mozambican province of Tete.

The rains have failed three years in a row in Tete. The railway line from the port of Beira has been blown up repeatedly by armed bands of the South-African backed Mozambican National Resistance (MNR), preventing food and fuel supplies from reaching the provincial capital. "I think we've had three trains get through over the past year," says Dr. Gingell. Vehicles travelling from the fertile northern district of Angonia to famine-ridden Changara in the south of the province have been attacked enroute. Now the road is impassable.

Many people have left Tete and gone over the border to Zimbabwe. For those who remain, there is little food: "What we're eating is goat and occasionally anything that gets through from Beira. There are no fruits or vegetables. And the problem is you can't buy goat any more, you have to barter it for a sack of flour or maize meal and people just don't have the sacks. You see people searching

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amongst the litter for food, you see people walking along the road and dropping dead..."

In two of Mozambique's southern provinces, Inhambane and Gaze, the situation is equally grave. At Vilanculos hospital in Inhambane, Dr. Ivan

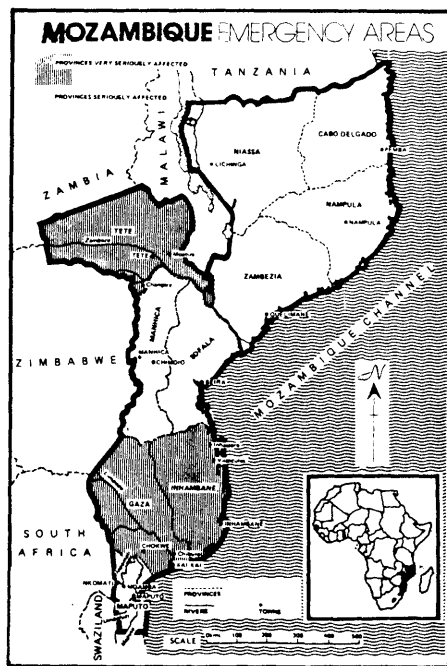
his own way to Vilanculos. Maybe they were unable to find food for him and just left him.

"Some children are abandoned by their parents because of hunger," says Guillermina Wetea, one of the six volunteers from the Mozambican Women's Organisation (OMM) who are running an orphanage for over 100 such children in Vilanculos. "Some come from the countryside accompanied by soldiers. They have walked for many days."

The soldiers who pick up abandoned and starving children have been stationed in Inhambane to try and eradicate the MNR and protect the people. Along the main coast road some 100,000 people have gathered in camps, or recuperation centres, after fleeing the hinterland. They fled not only because the harvest failed, but also in fear of the MNR "bandits", who have destroyed schools and health centres, and killed teachers, health workers, and local government officials.

People's bravery is amazing

According to Anne Rodrigues, Head of Nutrition in the Ministry of Health's Department of Preventive Medicine, "over 90 health posts have been destroyed by the MNR. I have seen health workers tortured, with their lips cut off. But many keep on working—it's amazing the bravery of the people". Amos Mahanjane, Director of Mozambique's Department of Natural Calamities, explains: "The bandits were stealing everything the population had, including food. They were coming to kill children and women, and men too. Now, with the rehabilitation centres, we are able to send in our soldiers for security."



Vaz gently tends to a child with a prolapsed rectum, the result of innumerable bouts of diarrhoea brought on by acute malnutrition. Where does the child come from? No one knows. They only know that he keeps returning to the hospital, never fully recuperating. Where are his parents? Maybe they died in the starved interior of Inhambane, and somehow he found



Although the people are undoubtedly better protected in the centres, the problem of guaranteeing supplies remains acute. The MNR is laying landmines and ambushes along the roads to the camps, trying to disrupt the distribution of food and medicines. Mozambique signed a Non-Aggression Treaty with South Africa in March 1984, in which South Africa promised to withdraw support to the MNR, but in the weeks before the signing, the "bandits" stepped up their campaign, determined to prove that the accord would not effect them. Recent reports suggest that the security situation in Inhambane is improving. At least two convoys of supplies have managed to penetrate the interior of the province, previously a "no go" area, but it is too early to say whether the treaty will bring lasting peace.

Although the MNR is making it

and another ten or 15 at Pambara, the nearest recuperation centre. But now death from malnutrition is pretty rare".

All relief work is co-ordinated by the Government Department of Natural Calamities. With a staff of eight people working to get aid to over five million people it is severely overstretched. While food and medical supplies must be imported, it is local voluntary initiatives that keep the operation going. *Socoristas*, young first aid workers trained by the local Red Cross, are working voluntarily in the recuperation centres along the Inhambane coast. The women of the OMM who run the orphanage in Vilanculos have worked since September 1983 without a day off and without pay. Their work is especially onerous. In addition to cooking, cleaning and caring for 106 children, many of whom need careful

plies and supporting local relief efforts is essential, it will not solve Mozambique's central problem: there is simply not enough food for everyone. According to the Ministry of Internal Trade, which regulates all food purchasing and distribution within the country, Mozambique needs 101,000 tons of basic grains in addition to the food aid already promised. In the short term, the government is appealing for more food aid to plug the gap; in the long-term it is trying to find ways of increasing food production.

In Mozambique, as in most of sub-Saharan Africa, there has been a dramatic decline in food production over the past ten years. Drought is one factor—in parts of the country it has not rained for five years—but the country's economic problems, and the failure of its agricultural policy, are at the core of the crisis.



difficult for the government and international agencies to carry out the relief operation, aid is getting through to some of the most critical areas. In Vilanculos, where a World Food Programme boat lands with regular food supplies, there has been a marked improvement in the health of the children. "It's really WFP's boat which has changed the situation," says a nurse working in the hospital and orphanage. "In October last year there were about 15 people a day dying in the hospital,

"I try to teach nutrition, but the mothers just laugh at me. They say: 'When was the last time we saw beans around here?'"
Photo: Julian Quan/OXFAM

attention because of precarious health, the women have to collect firewood and carry water up a steep hill to the orphanage.

There is not enough food

Although sending emergency sup-

When the Portuguese colonizers abandoned Mozambique at Independence in 1975, they took with them their skills, capital and equipment, and left behind an agricultural system geared to feeding the towns and exporting cash crops. The new government's efforts to produce food on state farms have mostly failed, and even the co-operative and family farmers, who still produce 60 per cent of all marketed surplus, have not managed to grow enough.



Exodus from Tete

"We saw homes which had been totally abandoned. Village after village along the Tete-Changara highway is deserted or near-deserted," said UNICEF Programme Officer Ed Madinger after a visit to Tete in April 1984. It is estimated that about 100,000 people have left Tete for Zimbabwe in search of food and safety. The administrator of Changara, the worst affected district, says that half the 94,000 population have gone.

When Claudio Crimi, Italian priest and headmaster of a boarding-school in another badly affected district, Cabora Bassa, started term in January, only 50 of his 900 students turned up. "The students have either gone to Zimbabwe with their families, or they have simply died of hunger," he explains.

In 1981, it was just the young men who were leaving. The harvest had failed again, so they went to barter livestock for grain, or earn money. Many found seasonal agricultural work, as Zimbabwe had a record harvest that year. Since they were kinspeople of the Zimbabweans in the area, they had little difficulty integrating. Although some sent home money or food to help their families in Tete, the situation continued to deteriorate. A doctor in Tete hospital says that most of the severely malnourished children she sees have no father, or that their fathers have gone to Zimbabwe.

In August 1982 a second wave of Mozambicans crossed the border. These were whole families, and they too integrated into Zimbabwean society. Then, in September 1983, a third wave started to flood in. These families arrived footsore and exhausted after a trek of up to three

weeks. Many were badly malnourished and in need of medical care. Some never made it—they died on the way.

The last wave of displaced people do not have family ties in Zimbabwe. Last year Zimbabwean families could help the people who came from Mozambique, but now their own harvest has failed and they have no food to spare.

The Zimbabwean Government is setting up four relief camps for a total of 46,000 people in Manicaland, Masvingo, Mashonaland Central, and Mashonaland East. World Food Programme is providing rations, and UNICEF will help with medical supplies and health facilities. Meanwhile the Ministry of Labour, Manpower Planning and Social Welfare, with the assistance of Provincial Governors, organize the distribution of food to refugee groups who are not yet in camps but need assistance.

Everyone agrees that famine relief must be linked to increasing food production, but the question is how. Anne Rodrigues, Head of Nutrition in the Ministry of Health's Department of Preventive Medicine, says: "Somehow we have to increase the availability of food at the family level. And I don't just mean food aid. We have to work seriously at guaranteeing a minimum amount of food throughout the year, both through production and storage."

Several aid agencies are bringing in tools, seeds, and fertilizer. Around one camp in Inhambane the people have been able to plant maize, millet, manioc, beans, and groundnuts. Although their first planting failed because of poor seed quality, the second sowing has germinated and there should be a small harvest in July. There won't be enough to feed everyone, and food aid will still be needed, but it's a start.

On a national level, the Government has revised its agricultural policy by scaling down support to the unwieldy state farms and increasing emphasis on



Some children are abandoned by their parents because of hunger. Many suffer innumerable bouts of diarrhoea. Photo: Julian Quan/OXFAM

the family and co-operative sectors. Importing consumer goods as an incentive for farmers to grow a surplus, and starting up cottage industries and small scale irrigation projects should help reverse the decline in food production.

UNICEF is at present working out its next five-year programme of collaboration with the government, and looking at how best to support the new agricultural policy. In the meantime, support is being provided for women's co-operatives growing food in the "Green Zones" around Maputo as well as supplementary feeding for the most malnourished children, and medical supplies are being brought in.

When the immediate emergency is over and the agricultural policy has started to bear fruit, the implementation of low-cost health measures UNICEF advocates through the Government's primary health care system will help reduce the presently increasing infant mortality rate. For the moment however, it's "Food First". As Anne Rodrigues says: "Talking about health and weaning doesn't make any sense when there's no food to eat." □

