

MOCAMBIQUE

Machel needs South Africa for survival

By José Ramalho



After three years of independence Mocambique's state coffers are empty and the prisons are full. Thousands of tons of Russian military hardware and hundreds of Soviet and Cuban military advisers have turned the country into an armed camp. Disenchantment with the Soviet Union has pushed FRELIMO back into the arms of communist China. And, supreme irony, more than ever before, Mocambique turns to South Africa for sheer survival.

Diplomatic sources in Maputo report that strong undercurrents of uncertainty and fear are widespread and there is an all-pervading feeling that the FRELIMO government is facing its moment of truth.

Says a Western diplomat: "With the country at the crossroads of its destiny, the question is not what will happen in the years to come but in the next three months."

The clock was put back to the early days of independence on June 25 1975 when, last month, President Samora Machel patched up his relationship with communist China after a torrid love affair with the Soviet Union. "Will he play one against the other, at the same time conducting a covert courtship with the US, or will he take the plunge and send the Russians packing as did his close friend President Siad Barre in Somalia?", ask political analysts.

Apart from other serious considerations, the Russians in Mocambique have made themselves thoroughly unpopular with all sectors of the population, including expatriates. "Their arrogance is unbelievable and they make no secret that they regard all Africans as inferiors," a diplomatic neighbour in the fashionable Polana suburb told TTP. A

Migrant miners: Frelimo keeps the gold ...



Independence: elation turned to gloom

Portuguese business executive comments: "Their attitude to other races is reminiscent of Nazi Germany's concept of the master-race." They do nothing to dispel these impressions. Living in almost total isolation, they keep their contacts on a strictly business basis with FRELIMO officials and shun any form of socialising.

Military observers are reported to be just as puzzled as their political counterparts. They dismiss as improbable the current assumption that the communist arms build-up in Mocambique is aimed at a massive invasion of Rhodesia. In their line of thinking, Western reaction to the recent Shaba events may prove a deterrent to Russian-inspired military adventurism.

Reports that most of the newly arrived war matériel has been concentrated in the provinces of Tete, Chimoio and Sofala, nearest to the Rhodesian border, are interpreted as indicating a reinforcement of defensive positions in the case of Rhodesian pre-emptive strikes such as last year's major raids on terrorist camps in Chimoio and Tembue. This is seen as a vicious circle in which troop concentrations on both sides of the border may trigger a dangerous escalation at a time when large-scale infiltrations of terrorists into Rhodesia are reportedly being planned.

A touch of surrealism is added to the Mocambique situation as the Marxist-Leninist regime despairs of getting anything more substantial than guns and slogans from its "natural allies", the communist countries, and pleads with the Pretoria government for stepped up financial and technical assistance, while making South Africa by far its major trading partner.

Hunting with the hounds and running with the hares, Machel cannot afford to drop his militant attitude when it comes to joining the vociferous outcry against "racism, colonialism and imperialism", of which South Africa is the main target. Sources close to the president say he thinks he can get away with it for as long as he keeps to words and a token contribution to terrorist training and arms smuggling across the border. Pretoria has shown phlegmatic restraint in dealing with Machel's antics on the sound basis of "better the devil we know" than creating the conditions for an Angola-type chaos.

The present economic crisis, the worst Mocambique has faced since independence, was pushed along by the heavy blow dealt to its ailing balance of payments by South Africa's revaluation of its gold reserves to bring them on a par with current world rates. Mocambique's migrant labour in the Rand gold mines had so far meant a steady flow of some R100 million a year to shore up the country's foreign currency reserves as gold payments at

a low rate were sold in the world market at their current value.

It had long been known that revaluation would put an end to the windfall. Incapable of making use of its tremendous natural resources, the FRELIMO government had been counting on international aid to see it through its difficulties with massive injections of hard cash. But the hoped-for flood proved to be a trickle and, in the last resort, all eyes turned to Pretoria for salvation.

So far, South Africa has been keeping the Mocambique economy from floundering altogether. Although gold payments for migrant mine labour have dwindled considerably, they still represent a fair proportion of Mocambique's foreign currency earnings. Together with South Africa's payments for the supply of Cabora Bassa power and for the use of the Mocambique railways and harbours, they form the bulk of FRELIMO's means of payment abroad.

But it is far from enough. Mocambique's needs are astronomical due to the disastrous effects on the economy of an abrupt change to rigid Marxist rules. As Mocambique's expatriate economic advisers see the situation, rescue may take the form of an emergency loan by Pretoria of about R40 million while urgent pleas are reportedly being made for South Africa to revert to the old gold rate as an exception to help Mocambique.

In any case, breaking point is fast approaching, say the economists, who point to the fact that only 5% of import permit applications for desperately needed machinery, spares and raw materials are being granted by the FRELIMO authorities.

Hence the forecast that the next three months will be crucial. If aid is not forthcoming the hard pressed industrial plants will come to a standstill and massive unemployment may ignite the slow smouldering resentment felt by the labour force.

With disaster looming on the horizon, the FRELIMO leadership still sees as top priorities the "restructuring of the party" and the creation of a huge army through compulsory military service.

Unfortunately for FRELIMO after three years of obsessive party work to make the masses politically aware, the people are still more concerned with the acute food shortages that require them to queue day after day for a loaf of bread or a piece of meat, than with Marx and Lenin teachings.

Little wonder fresh efforts are being made to bring them into the fold. Persuasion has given way to threats as in the case of would-be draft dodgers who have been told of the fate that awaits them if they do not rush to register. This applies to all Mocambicans from between the ages of 18 and 45.