

PETER VALE

Over the Nkomati Wall



Peter Vale is research professor and director of the Institute of Social and Economic Research at Rhodes University. He has just spent a fortnight travelling and researching in Mozambique.

There is a corner of a foreign field that is forever Homeland. It's at the corner of Avenida Eduardo Mondlane and Avenida Ius Nyerere in Maputo's Polana district. Until six months ago, an old colonial mansion stood on the site. In its place there now stands a precast grey and green structure which looks as if it was designed by the same automatons who are responsible for Bisho and Mmabatho.

This building, the South African trade representative's new office, seems to have captured something of Pretoria's long-held desire to shape its neighbours into its version of what is good for southern Africa.

There are, of course, staggering similarities between SA and Mozambique. This is not surprising: after all, their two capitals are less than an hour apart by air. And, even before Dias set his foot on Africa, there was traffic across the Nkomati River. But these days they tend to underplay both their closeness and the length of time they have lived side by side.

As a result, the Nkomati River — not unlike the Limpopo, the Caledon and the Zolopo — has become a Berlin Wall over which two different approaches to the region's conditions peer at each other. There is no real competition between the approaches, even if they appear fundamentally irreconcilable. SA's economic power and its proven ability to project its will reduce — for the moment, at least — any hint of competition to the realm of fantasy. For the immediate future, therefore, Maputo's destiny is in Pretoria's hands, as the trade representative's new office building confidently asserts.

All this, of course, was recognised by the

Nkomati Accord, which opened a window in the wall in the hope that constructive dialogue and mutually rewarding commerce might follow.

It's no secret that the late President Samora Machel needed the accord. The drag of the nationwide war with Renamo had created huge dislocations in his country's economy; Frelimo's ragtag army was stretched to breaking point; and Moscow, to say the least, had proved a disappointment.

It's also true that Nkomati helped SA temporarily — as it turns out — to stave off sanctions, and projected the country as a force for peace, prosperity and progress in southern Africa. P W Botha's 1984 visit to Europe was less of a reward for domestic reform than it was recognition of the creative role which SA should play in the region.

Today, all but the most myopic recognise that the Nkomati Accord is in tatters: the window is closed, if not quite barred yet. In its wake, street talk, innuendo and the SABC have become the central source of information about what is happening in a country of 8m people which is literally next door.

The occasional journalist or academic flits to the other side, bringing back "through the looking-glass" observations on Mozambique's fate — the country is a basket case; Joaquim Chissano's government is corrupt and on the point of collapse; and the Soviets haven't left a prawn in the place. South Africans recoil in horror, remembering — almost idyllically — how "old LM" represented what Africa should really be.

In such impressions are the seeds of mischief-making. They ignore the fact that Frelimo's 13-year-old government has proved one of Africa's most stable, notwithstanding the loss of Machel, a gifted leader by anybody's standard. They refuse to give credit to the vigorous way in which Chissano has stuck by an unforgiving IMF package — a tough course for a self-proclaimed Marxist-Leninist government — on a continent where even talking with the IMF is ideologically suspect. They don't bother to discover that a Mozambican Cabinet minister takes home a

monthly cheque equivalent to US\$150, and they fail to recognise that the aid which Mozambique receives from Italy surpasses that given by the Soviets.

The result has been a war which has continued unabated for more than a decade, a war increasingly carried forward by children. It is the most dangerous strain of war because it is formally controlled by shadowy forces of uncertain ideological hue with dubious political goals.

It is, frankly, still difficult to believe that some close to Pretoria are not behind those who are responsible for the war on Mozambique's people. Only last month a Renamo defector, Paulo Oliveira, claimed that he had given the Frelimo government "documentary evidence that SA is continuing to support the bandits." He also claimed that academics in SA (and West Germany) were playing a prominent role in developing a political profile for the rebels.

Not surprisingly, the Mozambicans and many others will continue to hold this view until the rebels are defeated, or until Pretoria turns half-hearted denials of its involvement into positive steps to halt Renamo. One such step could be to use the Portuguese service of the SABC to broadcast details of Maputo's offer of an amnesty to the bandits. At the moment this service, which enjoys unrivalled popularity deep in the bush, makes strongly bellicose noises against the Chissano government.

In the absence of positive steps, Mozambique's plight will be fully internationalised; already, the country is seen as the victim of apartheid's secondary symptom, endemic destabilisation of its neighbours. This has drawn increasing outside assistance towards Mozambique.

The British, for example, are giving non-lethal military equipment and training and the US Congress came within a whisker of doing the same. If sustained, this support will relatively increase Mozambique's distance from SA and diminish Pretoria's capacity to shape constructively the course of events next door. ■