

CONCERN OVER FUTURE OF M'BIQUE

Evening Post

8 JAN 1991

BEIRA — Soviet experts now being withdrawn from Mozambique are concerned about leaving the poverty-stricken country while it struggles against spreading famine.

"I don't know what the Mozambicans are going to do when we go. They will die without us," said Igor Zhdarkin, an interpreter with about 70 Soviet helicopter pilots based in this Mozambican port.

"The people wear rubbish clothes and are very hungry... they need us," he said.

The Soviet government, beset with problems at home, is turning its attention inwards and paring down once-generous aid contracts to former allies in the world.

Moscow's assistance to Mozambique used to total R500m a year but was cut to R225m in 1990 and is likely to fall again this year, a Soviet diplomat said recently.

Sergei Andreyev, first secretary at Moscow's Embassy in Maputo, told the London-based Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU):

"We have realised ourselves, and our Mozambican friends see that our resources are not so unlimited as we used to think. We have to try to match our obligations with our possibilities."

Only 450 out of an original 750 Soviet technical experts are left in Mozambique.

The two countries have been reviewing a 10-year cooperation accord that expired in 1990.

The new agreement, tailored to fit Moscow's straitened means and due to be ratified early this year, is

likely to emphasise trade rather than aid.

Most Soviet assistance to Maputo has been in the form of military advisers, hardware and technical experts. The rest was in credits, mostly used to buy oil.

About 66% of the country's oil comes from the Soviet Union, on credit but at market prices. Mozambique started importing oil from the Gulf before Iraq invaded Kuwait in August and oil prices soared.

The war against Renamo rebels has destroyed the country's road network, making it necessary to fly food to millions of displaced people facing starvation.

Since 1987 Mozambique has shifted away from Marxism towards a market economy and political pluralism.

A Soviet pilot in Beira, who asked not to be named, was scathing about Mozambique's progress despite years of promoting international socialism.

Sitting in a hotel bedroom plastered with pictures of scantily-clad girls torn from a South African soft porn magazine, he said:

"Look at what these people have done since independence. They have taken all that was most hyperbolic in the Soviet

example. Everything is done for friends and profit."

The pilot served in Angola and was injured in the war there.

He said he would like to visit South Africa, heartland of all he has fought against in Africa, before going home.

"I would like to visit the Transvaal, go to the Orange River and see the home of

the Boers. That's the last bastion of the white man in Africa," he said.

Most expatriate workers long for the day when they can return home, but Zhdarkin and his Soviet colleagues are not particularly happy about going back to a country in a winter of turmoil with mounting nationalism and food rationing.