

Reaching the "riot threshold"

Between mid-August and mid-September, an estimated twenty alleged criminals were beaten or burnt to death by enraged mobs in the Maputo suburbs (see "Criminal Lynchings", p. 14).

The lynchings follow a huge escalation in murder, armed robbery, rape and other violent crimes in Maputo and its surrounding areas over the last few months.

They also follow on complaints that the police are either unable or unwilling to do anything about the massive increase in criminal activity. Citizens complain that even when the police do have criminals in custody, they are very often quickly released, in some cases, it is claimed, because they have been able to bribe the police for their freedom.

Believing that the police are incapable of protecting their goods or even their lives, some people have reverted to the "wild West" method (as Maputo's daily *Notícias* has described it) of taking the law into their own hands and killing the offenders. They have tortured their victims with kicks, stones, knives and other implements and then, in many cases, "finished them off" by throwing gasoline on them and setting them alight.

This in a country that only a year ago abolished the death penalty and whose new constitution ensures all citizens the right to a fair trial.

It seems clear that while the police are partly at fault, the indifference to human suffering and corruption visible in their ranks is just a reflection of the situation in the society as a whole.

Though Maputo and its surroundings has been relatively protected from the brutal war being waged in the rest of the country, no Maputo family has been untouched by it: everyone has had at least one family member—some their whole families—killed by Renamo. The city is overflowing with people displaced from their homes in the rural areas who have come to the city to try to make a living. Another 14,000 Mozambicans have been forced to return without warning from their relatively stable existences in the former East Germany to a country at war that cannot use their skills and where unemployment is rampant.

At the heart of the social chaos is the stark inequality of Mozambique's "economic recovery program" (PRE), a structural adjustment program introduced by the government in 1987 with the support of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Successive devaluations, price rises without matching salary increases, the termination of food subsidies, have all worked to create a situation where families can no longer live on the wage that used to sustain them. Now everyone in the family must try to make money to buy food, so that Maputo's streets are filled with women and children selling fruits, vegetables, peanuts, cigarettes, beer, anything they can. Those who have nothing to sell try to survive by begging.

The same city is now full of luxurious imported goods that foreigners and an increasingly ostentatious Mozambican middle class are able and willing to acquire.

Maybe Mozambique has finally reached the "riot threshold" described by Joe Hanlon in his book, *Mozambique: Who Calls the Shots?* Hanlon claims the "riot threshold" is a concept used by World Bank and IMF bureaucrats to indicate the stage at which their structural adjustment measures are finally pushing a country too hard. Food riots, for example, would demonstrate that it is time to let off a little on the economic squeeze. Though the food riots Hanlon says the monetary institutions expected in Mozambique as early as 1988 did not take place, there has been a wave of modest strikes, which began in January 1990.

But it is perhaps this latest phenomenon, more than anything else, which provides a sense of the frustration and anger of a people, the majority of whom have become progressively impoverished, and who have scarcely known a moment's peace since their independence over 16 years ago.