

Police move to halt Maputo crime wave

The Mozambican police force mounted a massive operation in September to crack down on an alarming crime wave that had hit Maputo this year, and to collect the large number of weapons illegally in the hands of private citizens.

To some extent, the hand of the police was forced by mounting popular outrage at the soaring crime rate. This had led crowds of Maputo citizens to take the law into their own hands, catching suspected criminals and then lynching them rather than handing them over to the police.

Throughout August and early September anyone accused of theft was in danger of his life. Over 20 suspected thieves are known to have been lynched.

In these ugly incidents, crowds would typically beat the alleged criminal senseless, then set him alight. The method used often involved placing an old tyre round the victim's neck, dousing it in petrol and setting a match to it.

This method of execution was imported from South Africa, where it was known as the "necklace", and was used in the mid-1980s to take revenge on those believed to be collaborating with the apartheid system.

BP on top

In Maputo, a touch of macabre humour was added to the killings when the form of death was nicknamed "BP em cima" ("BP on top") - an ironic reference to the advertising campaign run by the Mozambican subsidiary of British Petroleum, which owns many of Maputo's petrol stations.

In one particularly horrific incident, people in the Polana-Caniço suburb grabbed three alleged criminals from police custody, and systematically beat them to death, then set the bodies on fire,

completely ignoring attempts by the police to disperse them.

Popular vengeance has gone to extraordinary lengths. On 1 September, one man managed to escape from his tormentors, and ran to the nearby Machava General Hospital, with a blazing tyre still round his neck. But the crowd pursued him, and refused to allow him any medical assistance. Indeed, they even threatened that any nurse who tried to rescue the man would also receive the "necklace" treatment.

On 5 September, a crowd invaded a Maputo police station in an attempt to lynch an alleged murderer. The man, Pedro Francisco, was wanted for armed robbery, and was believed to have shot a policeman dead. In arresting him, the police had wounded Francisco in the left leg and back.

But 200 people gathered outside the police station and demanded to be allowed to finish off the wounded man. They broke into the cells, beat Francisco senseless, and would doubtless have ended his life on the spot, had the Military Police not intervened. They managed to bring the situation under control after threatening the



A gruesome scene in a Maputo suburb as children laugh and dance around the body of a man beaten to death on suspicion of being a thief (AIM/Alfredo Mueche)

crowd with their rifles.

The first step in the police attempt to regain the initiative in the fight against crime was a statement issued on 9 September by the Maputo City Joint Command of the defence and security forces, asking citizens in illegal possession of firearms to give them up voluntarily over the next fortnight. Guns and other military equipment in the possession of unauthorised individuals were to be handed over to the nearest police station.

Although no formal amnesty was announced, the authorities guaranteed they would not charge anyone who complied with the request.

Police launch raids

At the same time, the police launched a series of raids aimed at breaking the back of the crime wave. By 28 September, this police roundup had resulted in 857 arrests, according to Maputo City police commander Alberto Mondlane. Of these, around ten per cent were deserters - 70 had deserted from the army, eight from the police, six from the militia, and one from the security service.

Of those arrested, 200 are being held for theft, and 15 face charges of armed robbery. Other charges include the trafficking and consumption of drugs, vagrancy, evasion of military service, and escape from jail.

Mr Mondlane said that 645 firearms had been seized or had been surrendered voluntarily.

The police had also recovered a wide variety of stolen goods, including six vehicles, and 18 motor-bikes, as well as televisions, video cassette recorders, refrigerators, stoves and hi-fi sets. They seized five kilos of precious stones, and "huge quantities" of marijuana and other drugs, some intended to be taken intravenously (Mr Mondlane was not specific as to whether this included any heroin or cocaine).

"We are pleased with the way in which the people have responded to our appeals", the commander told a 29 September mass meeting in the suburb of

Mafalala. As part of the operation, the police had asked citizens to cooperate with them by reporting any suspicious movements or activities.

Mr Mondlane told AIM that the operation involved both police and troops, and had its own budget and special "combat techniques". He said the amount of money and number of men involved was being kept secret.

Mr Mondlane was horrified by the lynchings, and told AIM he did not understand how people could behave in such a way - particularly since the death penalty has been abolished in Mozambique, and the new constitution specifically protects the right to life and to physical integrity.

He recognised, however, that the war of destabilisation, which has forced many rural families to migrate to the cities, the massive repatriation of Mozambicans from the former German Democratic Republic, and the exodus of Mozambican students from Cuba following rioting there last December, had all added to the high level of unemployment in Maputo, and had all worsened the economic situation in the capital.

Action against crooked policemen

The police also announced in September that legal action has been taken against 66 police officers since the beginning of the year. They have faced charges including desertion, intimidating civilians, accepting bribes, and theft of police funds.

Eight police officers in Maputo City have been expelled from the force. These include policemen who used their firearms without justification to kill citizens, and some who took part in armed robberies. All eight are to appear in court.