

Mozambican Re-education Camps Raise Rights Questions

By Jay Ross

CHICOMO, Mozambique—Naftal Muthemba made "a mistake" with the books in the Maputo Hotel where he worked two years ago. As a result he is one of 750 inmates of the Chicomo "re-education camp" in a desolate area of Mozambique about 125 miles north of the capital.

"Once he learns not to make such mistakes," said the camp commander, Jaime Rebich, "he will be released."

The problem from the Western point of view is that Muthemba, like most of the estimated 10,000 other inmates of re-education camps, has never been tried but was just sent to the camp by the police, who also determine when he will be released.

It is a common situation in Mozambique where, after the Portuguese settlers fled as a result of independence in 1975, the country was left without a single judge and only about 20 lawyers.

Re-education camps, which in the West raise the image of human rights violations, have mainly become a replacement for prisons in Mozambique for what are called "marginal" criminals, such as thieves, rapists and drug offenders.

Mozambican officials do not hide the fact that some nationals are political prisoners, perhaps as many as 3,000.

They are held separately on charges of deserting or informing in the decade-long war against former Portuguese authorities or working for the once feared Portuguese security police (PIDE).

Some, such as Uria Simango, accused of involvement in the 1969 killing of Eduardo Mandlane, the original leader of the independence movement, will never be released, officials say. They add, however, that in many countries Simango would have been executed.

The human rights issue in Mozambique, including the re-education camps, has had international repercussions as part of the reason for the country being on the congressional blacklist, preventing it from getting American development aid.

Although noting deficiencies, several Western diplomats in Maputo said the country's human rights record is better now than in many other African countries.

A recent visit to Chicomo put to rest many of the unfavorable images of re-education camps but it also left questions about how prisoners, particularly political ones, are faring in other camps.

They are mainly in the hard-to-reach northern part of the country which is twice the size of California with a coastline longer than the U.S. Pacific Coast.

Camps for political prisoners are not

open to visitors and it is only recently that the Chicomo camp, which only contains "marginals," has begun to receive foreign journalists.

There is little question, however, of ill treatment of the Chicomo prisoners.

Commander Rebich said there are 15 police to guard the 750 inmates. Only a couple guards were armed the day five Western journalists, including two from French Communist publications, visited the camp.

The inmates moved freely with little supervision and mingled with the guards. Except for the entrance gate, there were no fences around the camp. Its remoteness probably discourages escape attempts, since peasants in the area would easily spot the inmates.

The day is divided into educational and work phases, according to Rebich. The work consists of farming, since the camp raises most of its own food, and tailoring.

The education is political indoctrination about the ruling party, the Mozambican Liberation Front (Frelimo). For those who cannot read and write, about 90 percent of the population of the country, there is literacy training.

One key problem is that prisoners cannot receive visitors because of the remoteness of the area.

It is unlikely that Chicomo has been designated as a model camp to show visitors. The provincial official responsible for the camp has difficulty even finding the remote facility (he had only been there twice) and Rebich seemed genuinely surprised when the reporters arrived.

The government, however, does seem eager to improve its image over the issue of prisoners. President Samora Machel has released about 2,000 detainees, including some political prisoners, and closed three camps in recent months.

Jodr Luis Cabaco, the minister of information, defended the use of the re-education camps, saying they were necessary after the 10-year-war of independence because many Mozambicans had been turned against Frelimo by the Portuguese and the unrest had also caused a high level of urban crime.

He admitted that some of the camps had not worked out well but added, "We think they are very important and will continue until they are not needed any more."

Re-education is not confined to the camps in Mozambique. Displayed outside every government office is a row of pictures of people working there who cooperated with the colonial government, with their "crimes" listed.

The theory, Cabaco said, is that people who worked against Frelimo should confess so they are not vulner-

able to blackmail either by fellow workers or dissident elements, formerly based in Rhodesia but now shifted to South Africa.

The "rogues gallery" of photos was first put up in 1978 and the government intends to end the practice later this year.

"The problem of human rights is a very peculiar one," Cabaco said. "Frelimo led the Mozambican people to get the main human right — to be free and independent. Portugal as a colonial power was not blacklisted because of human rights, perhaps because of the air bases" on the Azores Islands in the Atlantic that it allows the United States to use, he added.

He then ticked off some advances made since independence: a 250 percent increase in the number of children in school and expansion of health clinics which now treat 10 times as many patients.

Before independence, measles killed more than 25,000 children a year. In 1978, as a result of a vaccination campaign, only 110 cases of measles were reported in the country, according to the United Nations.

"These are human rights, too—the right to knowledge and health. We're trying to provide them in a way nobody did in the past," the minister said.