

Mozambique Re-Educates Prisoners in Remote Camps

By JAY ROSS

The Washington Post

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 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 become a replacement for prisons in Mozambique for what are called "marginal" criminals, such as thieves, rapists and drug offenders.

But Mozambican officials do not hide the fact that there are as many as 3,000 political prisoners.

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.

Some, such as Uria Simango, accused of involvement in the 1969 killing of Eduardo Mondlane, the original leader of the independence movement, will never be released, officials said. They added, 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 and is 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 of 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).

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 several camps in recent months.

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

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