

GREEN PAGES: *War and reconstruction*

Carving ivory to survive

ON the Avenue 24 De Março in Mozambique's city of Beira, "Co-operativa De Artesano" is painted on the window of a small shop. The room inside is dirty, unfurnished and illuminated only by the light from the window. Here, six days a week, 18 men sit on the floor, each carving a statuette from either ivory or ebony, hoping to sell it to a tourist.

The only English speaker in the group smiles, introduces himself as Eduard Elessane, and displays his current project — a tusk about 34cm long with a woman's face carved roughly at the base. The rest of the tusk is dirty and smeared with blood. "It will look much nicer after it is carved and polished," he says.

The co-operative was formed in 1985. Elessane first began carving when he finished his military service in 1988, and found no job waiting for him. "My father used to carve wood, so I joined these men." He produces two to three carvings a week.

The cost of a small carving like Elessane's is 150 000 meticaïs (about R190) — not a bad price for a single man and the two days of labour it took to produce. But, as there are so few tourists in this small town, and as the few foreign aid workers

While the rest of the world clamps down on trade in elephant tusks, unemployed men from Mozambique carve ivory in a desperate attempt to earn a living. By **BLAKE OWENS**

face ivory bans at home, he only manages to sell one every two or three weeks. It is enough to keep him alive. "But some of the others, the ones with families," he says, "are truly suffering."

Because the unemployment rate is even worse than the tourist trade, they keep working, hoping things will pick up. Meanwhile, behind a wooden partition in the room, tables and shelves are filling with carvings waiting to be sold.

The ivory comes from elephants in Gorongosa National Park, one of the country's more beautiful spots, situated in Sofala Province. It is also a major Renamo stronghold.

Each week, a convoy of vehicles, loaded with food and other supplies, heads from Beira to the interior. Elessane accompanies them to the town of Inchope, where he meets military men — he insists they are Frelimo — who sell ivory from Gorongosa. Elessane doesn't know how the ivory

passes from the hands of the Renamo hunters to those of the Frelimo traders. There Elessane encounters artisans and tradesmen who have come from other parts of Mozambique, Malawi and Zimbabwe to buy ivory.

For small tusks, Elessane pays M25 000 (R31) a kilogram. For larger tusks, he must pay M30 000 (R38). Last week, he spent M500 000 on 20kg of ivory, enough to keep him and the other carvers busy for the next week.

Because of the Renamo presence in Gorongosa, surveys of the elephant population there are uncertain, but the government estimates Mozambique's total population at 13 350, down from about 60 000 in 1974. Elessane assures, however, that there are still "many, many" elephants there.

Elessane and the other carvers are not aware of the details of the controversy surrounding the trade in ivory, but they do understand that one day, a government official may come to the studio and confiscate all the co-operative's ivory. "If that happens," he says, "then I'll just start carving ebony. In any case, this is my only job. That's why I'm studying English, so I can help the customers when they come to our shop."