

Timber town flourishes in wilds of Mozambique

MESSICA (Mozambique). **RINGED** by hills and ridges, an industrial complex in the town of Messica has turned what was once bushland into a home for some 3 000 people.

Infloma, or Industria Florestal de Manica, as the industrial complex is known, consists of a multi-million dollar sawmill and a wall panel factory, and thousands of hectares of timberland forest that stretch north and south of the main highway besides which Messica is located.

The highway runs from the Zimbabwean border to Beira. From empty bush in 1980, Messica has grown into a town of 700 families, plus a second village on the other side of the highway.

"Infloma appears to have had a very positive impact on this area," says Cde Sergid Chitara, the new director of the large complex which has caused the growth of this town.

The physical surroundings alone are breathtaking. Every man-made structure seems to have been erected on a rise and from every work-site one gets a beautiful view of the picturesque hills and valleys of the surrounding countryside.

The industrial complex is an expression of the belief of Frelimo that all industrial development should not be concentrated in the large urban areas, but rural people too should benefit

directly from such investment.

Doubts were initially expressed at the wisdom of such a high-technology project in a country where the most important element of the economy — agriculture — needs massive resources to develop.

"I still have a lot of doubts about that aspect," says Mr Greg Utzig, a Canadian forester working at Messica. "The classic case is seeing a woman walk along the road carrying firewood on her head, passing by a logging truck that has stalled because it has no spare tyres."

Infloma does suffer the general Mozambican plague of lack of funds for spare parts. "Infloma was never intended to produce for export," says project director Cde Chitara, "but only for the domestic market".

That means it has no power to earn foreign exchange necessary for imported inputs such as chemicals for the panel factory.

One possible way to resolve the problem, admits Cde Chitara, is to produce for the foreign market. But that will need foreign investment which is not likely to be forthcoming without a major downgrading of the war being waged by the bandit Mozambique National Resistance.

In general, however, the area around Messica looks relatively prosperous, considering that the entire country is slowly trying to restart

agriculture after years of crippling drought.

The town of Messica has a number of small private businesses — a store, a tailor, a photographer, three maize-grinding mills — plus a bank and a post office.

The management of Infloma complex has been actively supporting the small-scale local industry and co-operative efforts. Some of the efforts have sprung from unpopular management decisions to streamline Infloma's operations.

Personnel director, Cde Antonio Lameira, describes the reaction of a number of construction workers who were laid off and asked to form a co-operative to continue building houses at the centre.

"If Infloma can't build houses because of a lack of materials," the co-operative members asked, "how are we going to do it?"

The answer was to expand to include brick and roof tile products and to open a carpentry co-operative.

Now 900 roof tiles are being produced each day.

To burn the bricks, Infloma sells dried logs that can't be used in the sawmill. Better quality wood is used for furniture, doors and window frames.

"Infloma has problems with roads and drainage," says Cde Chitara. "And so we have contracted co-operative members to do the work."

The co-operative mem-

bers have also been encouraged to diversify. So they have begun to work on an abandoned farm to produce food and to open up a shoe-making business.

The raw materials and tools for these enterprises have been provided in part by Infloma on a rental basis. International organisations too have helped. "The carpentry co-operative has done so well," says personnel director, Cde Lameira, "that they've just raised their own salaries to above what they made when they worked for Infloma."

Military operations — by both Mozambican and Zimbabwean forces — have tightened up security for Infloma and the surrounding countryside. But there are other problems that will emerge.

One of the incentives that Infloma was able to offer to workers in efforts to stabilise the labour force was a guaranteed supply of maize, sugar, oil, fish and soap.

It was supplied by the World Food Programme and is due to end its three-year term next March. The food supply is viewed by Cde Chitara as one of three reasons why it has been able to maintain a reasonable labour force.

The other two reasons are the ability to safeguard workers from being picked up in government swoops against the unemployed and the ability to protect them from draft into the army. — Ziara-IPS.