

Teachers ^{WM} learn to heal ²⁰ ⁻²⁶ traumatised ⁴ ⁴¹ children of Mozambique

By ANDREW MELDRUM: Harare

FILLED to the brim with eager students, the Mozambican school on the outskirts of Maputo is woefully short of books and other supplies. Just four of the 15 classrooms have desks and chairs, while in the rest the children sit on swept floors, huddling together to pore over the scarce textbooks.

Bullet holes in the walls are grim reminders of attacks by Renamo rebels. Despite the rounds of negotiations in Rome, the war continues and is once again creeping near Maputo. Night-time Renamo raids on the *bairro* (poor neighbourhood) occur frequently and sometimes children are kidnapped.

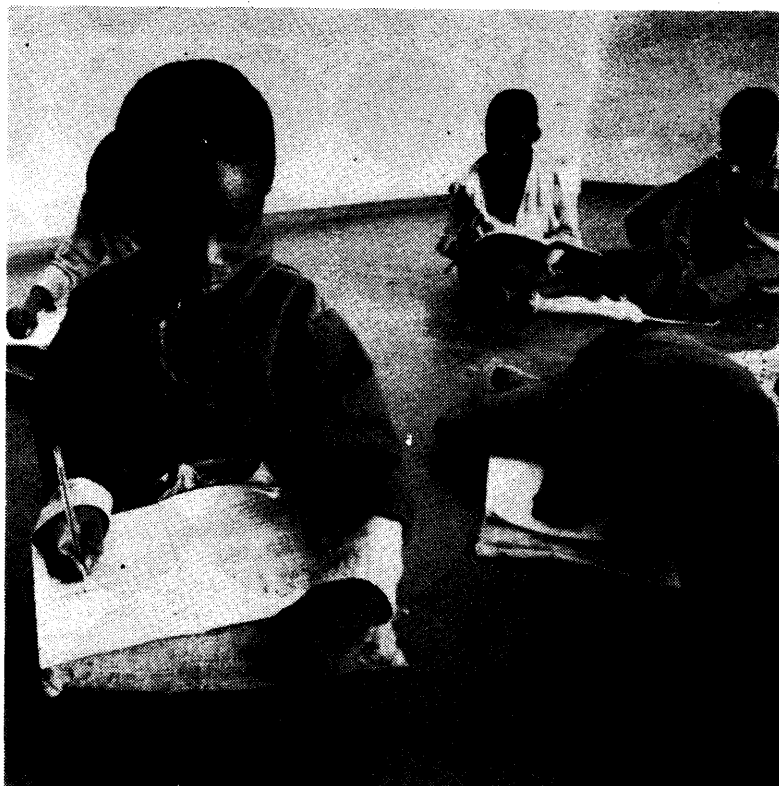
Joao, 33, is a thin, bearded, nervously energetic fifth grade teacher who has 63 students in his morning class and 54 students in the afternoon. It would seem he has far too many students to know any of them as individuals, but he tries to give them specialised attention.

Speaking through an interpreter, Joao describes Luna, a gawky 13-year-old girl who was in his class last year. "At first I did not notice her," he admits. "She was very timid and did not do very well in class."

But then Joao took part in a weekend programme to show teachers how to deal with the thousands of students who have been traumatised by the war's violence. "That training opened my eyes and I identified Luna as one of my troubled students," said Joao. "I spoke to her and found out that she had been kidnapped and forced to live with the rebels for two years. She had escaped and lived with her grandmother but she was still worried about her family. She was still frightened."

Joao talked to Luna after classes, "to let her know she was not isolated".

Slowly, his efforts began to pay off.



Pupils work on lessons in makeshift classroom in Chicualacuala

Photograph: ALEXANDER JOE

"Luna began mixing with the other children. Her marks started to get better and by the end of the year we were able to pass her to the next grade."

The course that trained Joao to help war-affected children is run by Mozambique's Education Ministry and the British charity, Save the Children. The teacher training programme was started after it was estimated that well over one million children have been traumatised by the war's violence.

"A very effective therapy is to let the children draw," said British specialist Naomi Richman, who has worked in

the programme since 1989.

"I think drawing is one of the best ways to get children to express themselves, but most schools do not have the crayons and paper needed so instead we encourage teachers to talk with their students."

In the *bairro* school, Joao is keen to pursue the counselling he has learned. And Luna? What has happened to the girl that Joao helped last year?

There are not many stories with happy endings in Mozambique. Luna did not return to school this year and no one knows what happened to her.