

Mozambique on brink of famine because of war, drought

MAPUTO. —Drought and war have brought Mozambique to the brink of catastrophic famine, say UN officials in Maputo.

"The situation in the countryside is desperate," a Development Programme resident representative Mr Peter Simons said. "Unless they end this war to an end, there is going to be a tremendous catastrophe here."

The United Nations estimates that at least 3.1 million people in areas under government control need emergency food aid, with thousands barely surviving on roots, berries, beetles and grubs.

The situation in areas held by rebels of the Mozambique National Resistance (Renamo) is believed to be worse, although there are no figures for those in need of aid there.

A mass migration of people is keeping across the drought-hit central and southern provinces as people flee Renamo areas in search of food and shelter in government-held towns.

The rebels are reported to be allowing them to leave, in contrast to past policy, and UN officials say hundreds of rebels have themselves abandoned their weapons and joined the flight for food.

Figures on the number of famine-related deaths throughout the country are difficult to establish, with statistics showing perhaps a dozen or a score of people dying.

"But when it comes it's going to come very quickly as it did in Ethiopia," said Unicef representative Mr Daniel O'Dell. "All the signs are there."

World Food Programme director Mr Mark Latham said the reality would be far worse than the statistics.

"There are the more dramatic cases where you find a whole village has died because there is no water."

"Very large numbers of children are dying," he said.

Tens of thousands of people have poured into areas such as the Beira and Limpopo corridors, road and rail networks linking Zimbabwe to Mozambique's Indian Ocean ports.

At Mabalane along the corridor through Gaza province, they dig for water in the dry bed of a river English writer Rudyard Kipling once called "the great, grey, green, greasy Limpopo."

Salt water from the sea has reached 60 km up the Limpopo as the flow of fresh water has disappeared in the worst drought to hit southern Africa this century.

UN officials say there is enough food aid in the country for immediate needs, but that organisational and transport problems mean that only a fraction is reaching the starving people.

A large part of the government's truck fleet has broken down or been wrecked by Renamo, and the United Nations and non-governmental organisations are urgently seeking a more active role in food distribution, including the hiring of privately-owned trucks.

The United Nations is also negotiating for food corridors to be opened into Renamo areas.

Renamo agreed during talks in Rome last month.

that food aid convoys would be allowed into its areas under the flag of the United Nations or the International Committee of the Red Cross provided they were not accompanied by military escorts.

The roads to be used are still the subject of negotiation.

President Joaquim Chissano and Renamo leader Afonso Dhlakama pledged at the Rome talks to sign a cease-fire by October 1. —Sapa/AFIP