

FOREIGN AFFAIRS Flora Lewis

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The Ordeal of Maputo

MAPUTO, Mozambique
A senior Mozambican official answered the general question about his country's direction with a wry smile. "What you in the West used to say about us was never quite right, and what you're saying now isn't quite right either," he said.

The implication was that despite some appearances, Mozambique didn't really plunge into the Soviet sphere and model itself after the Russians when it gained independence from Portugal in 1975, and that it hasn't totally flip-flopped now. But there have been important changes. They are toward an eager opening to the West, urgently needed but painful economic reforms, and a desperate struggle for survival in a dangerous neighborhood.

This sprawling country of 14 million, stretched along the east coast of Africa from the South African border to Tanzania, is another example of the complex forces at play in the area and the folly of snap judgments in distant Washington. Their prime concerns, as in most of Africa, are to maintain hard-won independence, create a nation within the borders inherited from the colonial past, and mobilize an untrained, hungry population to work for development.

The charismatic leader, President Samora Machel, died with many of his Cabinet members in the crash of his plane over South Africa last year. Whatever the investigators finally report, many people here will never stop suspecting a plot. But the succession has gone remarkably smoothly and all indications are that President Joaquim Chissano, formerly Foreign Minister, is determined to carry on Machel's latter-day policies of reform and search for balance.

Mr. Chissano is a trim, slight man with a jutting little beard. He looks younger than his 47 years, but he speaks with a quiet humor, a firm sense of practicality and a grasp of international as well as regional issues, which give him an air of well-established authority.

He likes to talk to visitors on the tree-shaded lawn of what was once the Portuguese Governor's palace, explaining that is why it is now called the "Presidential palace" with neither embarrassment nor pomp. Nearly 12 years after independence his country is still at war, but now his Frelimo movement, which won the guerrilla war, runs a Government fighting guerrillas backed by South Africa.

The guerrillas call themselves Renamo (National Resistance Movement). They have disrupted an already devastated economy though they don't seem able to control territory, only to increase the economic dependence of Mozambique and its landlocked neighbors on South Africa.

President Machel sought to reduce the threat to the U.S.-brokered Mkoma Agreement of 1984, in which Mozambique promised to stop use of its territory for its African National Congress attacks against South Af-

Struggling for survival, Mozambique walks a thin line.

rica in return for Pretoria's pledge to stop helping Renamo.

It is now evident that South Africa did not stop. One proof is that while Renamo claims that its equipment is all captured from Government forces, it has much better communications and apparently transport facilities than the Government ever had.

But Mr. Chissano says he will continue to respect Mkomati, partly because it makes clear "the source of the conflict in southern Africa," partly because he considers that it still deters the South Africans from open aggression with their own forces, as they have done in Angola to the west.

Meanwhile, in an ironic reversal of tactics, the Government is trying to learn what it can about putting down guerrillas from those with experience — the Portuguese, the British, the French, even the U.S., though Congress has refused the logistical, non-combat aid Mozambique needs.

The weapons come from the Russians and their allies, and of course Mozambique is glad to accept. But that hasn't tied the Mozambicans to Moscow, after all, and ideology is being diluted now.

Top officials talk openly of the "mistakes" made by the regime when it set out to organize a country stripped of economic and administrative structures and "the disease of radicalism which affects young revolutions." The impression is that the changes are being made because of recognized internal need, not to please or impress anybody outside, east or west.

It is almost impossible to exaggerate the problems here, compounded by the terrible drought of 1981-84. But the serious efforts to make the country work for its own sake, and in cooperation with the region, deserve attention. South Africa is trying to pull it down "posing as policeman of the region," as Mr. Chissano says. Mozambique merits support for the sake of the "peace and interdependence" that is his goal for southern Africa. □