

Abducted villagers keep rebel army going

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Tens of thousands of Mozambican peasants are being held in slave labour camps which anti-government rebels have created as supply bases for an escalating guerrilla campaign that is gradually reducing large parts of the country to a state of chaos.

The existence of the camps, each containing as many as 3,000 prisoners, has been reported to *The Times* by escaping inmates who are among the refugees who are continuing to flee daily, in their hundreds, from vast areas of the central and northern provinces.

Ruthless rebel activity there has now rendered more than a million people homeless and is threatening two million more with imminent starvation, in what aid workers say is the worst international disaster since the famine in Ethiopia.

Terrified refugees have been running before the fighting in increasing numbers for six months now. But it is only recently that among them have appeared groups who have escaped from the rebels' slave camps.

Last week, more than 2,000 who had escaped during the confusion caused by a Gov-

ernment counter-offensive, reappeared at Namaunica here in the remote northernmost Niassa province. Most of them were entirely naked. Others have wrapped themselves in the bark of trees. Many of the children were suffering from diseases associated with malnutrition.

Two weeks earlier 2,560 refugees appeared, in a similar condition, near the town of Muiterere. This group has now been moved by the local authorities to a transit camp established in an abandoned Italian mission at the foot of the Mitucue mountains. The camp is nearer to the refugees' original homes and close to the comparative safety of the garrison town of Cuamba. There they spoke about their six-month ordeal.

"The bandits came around three o'clock when the sun was high in the sky. We heard no shooting. They just appeared before us, quietly, like cats," one of the escapers, Rosario Muterume, said. "Armed bandits," is the official term used by the Marxist Frelimo Government, which has ruled Mozambique since independence, to describe the Mozambique National Resistance Army (MNR, also

known as Renamo) which was largely the creation of the security forces of white Rhodesia and has since been given extensive backing by the South African Army.

"We were living in huts we had made in the bush. We used to live in a village at Carau but the bandits burnt it earlier in the year so we made new homes, hidden among the trees. But they found us."

The guerrillas rounded up the 500 members of the Carau community and force-marched them to a camp at Mussala, deep in the bush. "The place was a village. The local people were still there working in the fields and preparing food for the bandits who live among them. We were told that we had to work for the soldiers too. Then they went back to our homes and stole everything," another farmer, Tipatara Malingakani, said.

"They found two men there who had hidden when they first arrived. The bandits brought them to join us. But then they said the men were informers who must be executed. We all had to stand and watch as they were beaten to death with sticks and hammers.

"The bandits gave us no food for six months. All we could get was what we could beg from the people of the village.

"Anyone who refused to work was beaten. They never showed any mercy. Anyone who tried to escape would be killed, they said. No one tried; as well as the soldiers who lived with us, there were sentries all around the place."

After a month in the camp, increased activity by Government forces in the region prompted the MNR to march its entire population for six hours to a stronger, more remote camp at Mutepa.

"There were 3,000 people there. We found out that our first camp was there to guard this one," Mr Muterume said.

These reports throw new light on the standing of the MNR rebels, who claim to be able to deny the Government access to 85 per cent of rural Mozambique.

Until now some observers have assumed that the MNR must enjoy a degree of local support in these areas. But the news from the escaping refugees gives credence to the claims of the Mozambique Government that the rebels are not supported by local people and are sustained only

by South Africa and other parties intent on destabilizing the frontline opponents of apartheid.

What is beyond question is the effect such activity is having on the 14 million population of Mozambique. Current figures, compiled from the reports of the various United Nations agencies in the field, show that there are now 1,006,600 internal refugees in the country and 245,000 more have fled to neighbouring Malawi, South Africa, Zimbabwe and Zambia. A further 2,521,600 people are affected by the conflict to the extent that, without international food aid, they are in danger of starving to death.

A limited amount of food aid has been forthcoming. But much of the aid is piled in warehouses in the country's ports.

The MNR regularly sabotages almost all the country's railway lines and many areas are unsafe even for armed military convoys.

The result is that when the Mozambique Red Cross in Niassa was asked to help the 2,000 naked people in Namaunica with clothes and food, it had literally nothing with which to respond. It did not even have the fuel for aid workers' cars to travel the 22 miles to provide first aid.