

Mozambique

Up from nothing

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The latest pictures of African horror—the fly-ridden, swollen-bellied children, mothers with their milk dried up—come from Mozambique. Curiously, they show that things are getting a little better there. For several months there has been bitter famine in the northern provinces, as civil strife spread across a region whose economic and political organisation had already collapsed. Outsiders, including the aid agencies, rightly stopped trying to go into the danger area. Now the rebel advance has been checked, and the outsiders are moving back: so the descriptions of famine are coming out, and some relief is in sight.

The South Africa-backed rebel group Renamo mounted an offensive late last year out of Malawi. The rebels wanted to break southwards across the corridor that bisects Mozambique and connects landlocked Zimbabwe with the port of Beira. They also tried to push eastwards to the sea-coast in the northern half of the



country: they were probably hoping to collect ammunition and supplies sent from the island of Mayotte, whose French rulers are willing hosts to mercenaries with ties to South Africa. The rebels, inadequately armed, failed with both pushes. They also lost the support they had at first received from Malawi.

Things have turned around since Mozambique's President Machel died last October when his aircraft crashed into a South African hillside. He bequeathed to his successor, Mr Joaquim Chissano, a final diplomatic success. At Machel's request, Zimbabwe and Tanzania, landlocked Malawi's big neighbours, threatened Malawi's ancient president, Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda, with a trade boycott unless he stopped protecting the rebels. He did: Renamo was driven out of its Malawian bases.

Zimbabwe, in its own interest, helped to curb the rebellion. The Beira corridor is Zimbabwe's lifeline. Zimbabwean soldiers kept it open, and prevented the

rebels from crossing it. A British company, Lonrho, which has interests in both Zimbabwe and Mozambique, owns the pipeline that carries most of Zimbabwe's oil along the corridor. British soldiers have helped train Mozambicans, and a Lonrho subsidiary has been recruiting white mercenaries to guard Mozambique's railway lines and factories.

With the Mozambican rebels at least temporarily thwarted, trucks can travel and food can be moved to where it is needed. Thousands of tonnes of Zimbabwe's large maize surplus are stocked at the border with Mozambique waiting to be brought in as soon as some aid money is available to pay for it.

Fertile Mozambique should not need help with food. Economic mismanagement, as well as war, is to blame for its hunger. Farmers who cannot sell or transport food do not bother to grow it.

Mr Chissano's predecessor had begun to nudge Mozambique's centrally-planned economy in a free-market direction. He had also begun to clear the way for more foreign aid and investment, by trying to make his peace with the International Monetary Fund. Mr Chissano has gone energetically ahead with that. Last month the government set more realistic

prices for many goods and for the local currency, whose official rate was devalued from from 40 to around 200 to the dollar (still a long way short of the unofficial price of 1,800). It is too early to hope, but it is just possible that as western viewers are watching scenes of misery from Mozambique, the Mozambicans may be taking the first steps back to a tolerable life.



A flicker of hope for Mozambique