

# Hunger as ammunition in a guerrilla war

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In the second of three articles written behind rebel lines in Mozambique, Sharon Behn reports on the causes of malnutrition in a land of plenty.

CORN and manioc farms sweeping across central Zambezia province were an unexpected sight in a country that international aid organisations have described as a second Ethiopia. "There is no one dying of hunger in our zones," Afonso Dhlakama, commander-in-chief of the Mozambican National Resistance (Renamo), told me during a four-week visit to rebel areas.

The land I was shown was heavily cultivated. In addition to the corn and manioc, the farms, or *machambas*, also grow peanuts, rice, beans and pumpkin. Bananas, papaws, oranges and grapefruit grow wild.

Oxfam and other relief bodies have said "the situation in Zambezia is terrible" and millions are facing starvation in Zambezia and Tete provinces. Renamo claims starvation exists only in government-controlled districts, where war-panicked thousands are stranded in the main towns.

"As there is no threat of war here, people can plant and harvest in peace. We also encourage them to cultivate their own *machambas*," said Joaquim

Alfae, a local Renamo commander. Renamo has been fighting the Frelimo government and its allied Zimbabwean and Tanzanian troops almost since the country gained independence from Portugal in 1975.

The system the rebels have started in their "liberated" areas is similar to the one that existed under Portuguese colonial rule.

When the rebels capture a new area they move the peasantry further behind their lines to better-controlled zones and hand them over to *mambos*, or village elders. The *mambos* relocate the people, providing them with land to grow food.

One family I spoke to said they traded their surplus food for salt or give it to the rebels.

But the rebels have serious distribution problems. Lacking any form of transport except a fleet of ageing motor cycles, their food has to be carried over large distances by bearers.

Fi Onorino Venturini, an Ital-

ian priest who was taken by the rebels on foot from the coastal district of Pemane to the western side of Zambezia, agreed supply lines were weak. "In one base, where we stayed one month, we went hungry," he said.

Although there was little evidence of starvation in the areas I visited, there is malnutrition. There is no milk, and little salt and oil. "We desperately need vitamins, especially for the children," a nurse said.

The largest *machambas* belong to Renamo and are near their main military bases. They are cultivated by non-combatants and members of the communities chosen by the *mambos* of surrounding villages.

Renamo pays some of these workers in captured Mozambican currency. But the rebels admit that except for a few stores located on their side of the border, there is nowhere they can spend the money. "It is the beginning of commerce and will be used when

the war is over," explained Mr Alfae.

"We have about 300 *machambas* of one to two hectares (2.4 to 5 acres) apiece in Zambezia alone," said one commander during a motor-cycle ride through fields of manioc, corn and beans. The insurgents say these farms supply not only rebels based in Zambezia, but also provide food for those in coastal Nampula province.

Considerable quantities of food have also been captured from the government forces. "The food the aid organisations send to Mozambique doesn't go to the people, it goes straight to the armed forces, and we capture it from them," said Calisto Meque, Renamo's commander in Zambezia.

Renamo officials claim that the cause of starvation in government areas is an abortive state-farm production programme. "The co-operative *machambas* never worked, they just created discontent," said Carvalho

MBona, a former government administrator who joined the rebels last year. "Also, when (government) Frelimo troops came into a town, they would just take people's chickens, pigs and corn."

Mr Dhlakama, who insists Renamo is not waging a war of starvation against the Mozambican people, has appealed to international aid agencies to talk to his forces about the food crisis. "If food help is only destined for government areas ... it will be regarded as aid for the Maputo regime and not the Mozambican people," he said.

■ In a statement released in Lisbon yesterday, Mr Dhlakama appealed to all African states to recognise Renamo as a "legitimate and genuine opposition organisation".

He also warned that the insurgents would intensify military activity against the Frelimo government.

Mr Dhlakama advised Malawi's President Hastings Banda not to send troops to protect the Nacala corridor, connecting Malawi with the Indian Ocean. "We warn President Banda not to play with fire," the statement said.