

And the Peasants Suffer

Mozambique, one of Africa's poorest countries, is caught in a pincer movement of war and hunger.

A quarter of the people have lost their homes and are dependent on foreign aid for their food. Some have been reduced to wearing sacks and pieces of bark. But unlike the terrible famine in Ethiopia, the tragedy in the former

Portuguese colony is predominantly man made.

Four and a half million Mozambicans out of a total population of 14 million are said to be affected by the emergency. Of these one and a half million are classified as displaced peo-

ple by the Frelimo government in Maputo, the capital. The north is particularly badly affected.

In the fertile province of Zambezia one million of the three million people have been forced out of their homes by rebel attacks. Traditionally Zambezia and the other northern provinces are the bread basket of Mozambique, supplying food to other areas.

"The displaced people (*deslocados*) are not feeding themselves and they are certainly not producing food to sell to other parts of Mozambique", said a government spokesperson. "I have been to many places where the threat of acute hunger is growing", said one aid official.

May and April is harvest time to Mozambique but this year's crop is expected to be the lowest for thirty



years. "The maize is simply not being harvested in Zambezia because tens of thousands have fled from the countryside", said the government spokesperson.

The scale of the human tragedy is enormous. Even though the government forces are now retaking territory occupied by the Mozambique National Resistance (MNR) the suffering continues. "We are liberating devastated towns and destitute people", said the spokesperson. There are persistent reports of atrocities, including rape and mutilation, carried out by the MNR against the local people. "People have fled their homes, often at night and frequently have nothing to wear but rags, bits of sacking or the bark of trees", said Oxfam.

Last month a Mozambique government official said 4.52 million Mozambicans were affected by the emergency and another 250,000 had become refugees in neighbouring countries. The United Nations Secretary-General, Perez de Cuellar, said infant mortality was now 325 to 375 per thousand.

The gross national product is estimated to have fallen 40% since 1982, mainly because of the war. Cashew nut production has fallen by two thirds since 1981 and from being an exporter of sugar, the country no longer even grows enough for its internal needs.

The South African decision to repatriate 60,000 Mozambican migrant workers last year, was a severe blow, depriving the country of a third of its

export earnings. But on top of deliberate destabilisation there have been natural calamities too.

Severe drought is affecting large parts of Gaza Province in the south. In last month there was no water in the border town of Chicualacuala and supplies had to be trucked in from Zimbabwe at heavy cost.

Last year unseasonal rains returned with a vengeance in Nyassa province in the north and washed out the young seedlings, severely damaging the crop. In Sofala province around the port of Beira, drought means that rice cannot be planted.

Last month donor nations responded with about \$200 million of food and cash in response to a United Nations appeal for \$244 million of aid for troubled Mozambique. The European community pledged an extra 45,000 tonnes of food aid and the United States another 44,000 tonnes.

There are still desperate shortages of lorries, petrol and even soap in Mozambique. Ironically there is plenty of surplus maize in neighbouring Zimbabwe if only the financial aid can be supplied to buy it. Britain alone air-lifted 100,000 T-shirts last month.

In June the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is expected to decide whether or not Mozambique will be eligible for another tranche of loans. But in return the Marxist government in Maputo will be required to devalue the Metical and cut spending on education and health.

"Even if the war were to end tomorrow the degree of long-term aid that the country would need is massive", said one aid worker. One quarter of the country's health centres, the bases for the child immunisation programme, have been destroyed by the MNR, for example.

"Most people see no end until the problem with South Africa is resolved", said Oxfam. "Probably South Africa will go on destabilising its neighbours and if sanctions are imposed South Africa could even invade Mozambique", said a spokesperson.

The crucial issue now is to persuade the peasants to move back to their lands by October to plant their maize in time for the rains in November. But there is no transport for the people and shortages of seeds and farming implements.

"The people will not go back until they are confident the bandits will not attack them", said a government spokesperson. But the army cannot be everywhere in a country three times the size of Britain, where communications were never easy even before destabilisation.

"We ran and we left many things, house, furniture, plates... many things were left with the armed bands", said the woman who had lost everything. One day the bandits may stop tearing her country apart. Until then she will depend on handouts from overseas. ●

John Tanner