

War leaves Mozambique starving

Mozambique is experiencing massive food shortages as a result of attempting to build socialism on the borders of apartheid. **Paul Fauvet** reports on a country with one of the highest child mortality rates in the world.



HUNGER: a woman comforts her underweight child

Mozambican President Joaquim Chissano arrives in Britain on 6 May for his first visit to the West since his election in November as the successor to Samora Machel, victim of a plane crash which most analysts in Maputo believe was caused by the South African military.

Chissano will doubtless try to impress on the British government the urgency of supporting the front line states in their life or death confrontation with the South African apartheid regime. Regardless of whether Margaret Thatcher commits further aid to Mozambique, the British left should use this opportunity to express its solidarity.

All too often, support for the front line states has been: a missing dimension in anti-apartheid activity. Yet, as last week's commando raid on the Zambian town of Livingstone graphically demonstrated, Pretoria has no respect for international boundaries, and conducts the southern African conflict, not simply as repression against the black majority inside South Africa, but as a full-scale regional war.

In that war Mozambique has suffered horribly, paying the full price for defying South Africa and attempting to build socialism on the borders of apartheid. The war waged by Pretoria's surrogates of the so

called Mozambique National Resistance (MNR) has devastated much of the countryside, laying waste Mozambican agriculture, and driving hundreds of thousands of peasant farmers off their land.

Over four million Mozambicans are now at risk of food shortages, and at least 1.2 million of them have been displaced from their homes by rebel activity.

Those who suffer most are the children. They are the most vulnerable to malnutrition and to the whole gamut of hunger-related diseases. The war has thrown the development of the Mozambican health service into reverse, and Unicef now estimates that between 325 and 375 children in every thousand die before they reach the age of five. A similar child mortality rate exists in the other major victim of South African aggression, Angola. These are the highest child mortality rates in the world.

The tactics employed by the MNR are designed to depopulate rural areas, and flood the towns with frightened peasants, straining urban services to breaking point.

Nothing else can explain the land mines planted on paths leading to peasant fields, or the complete destruction of villages, including their grain stores, or the savage and apparently random mutilations



HOMELESS: displaced people living in a camp at Mopeia in the lower Zambezi valley

carried out by the MNR. This is a strategy born in Pretoria, and its aim is to sever the links between town and countryside.

The immediate result is a massive food crisis. 1986 was the worst year on record for agricultural marketing: according to the state marketing board, AGRICOM, no more than 40,000 tonnes of basic grains (maize and rice) were marketed – less than 10% of needs. The gap had to be filled by purchasing grain abroad and by food aid.

This year marketing is unlikely to be significantly better than in 1986, Mozambique has no foreign exchange to make any commercial purchases, and on UN estimates the country will require well over 600,000 tonnes of grain in food aid.

People in the areas worst hit by the MNR are not just hungry: they are completely destitute. Many have been reduced to wearing bits of sackcloth, or even to making crude loin-cloths out of flattened pieces of tree bark. They are desperately short of medicines, soap, salt and all consumer goods, as well as of inputs such as seeds and handtools needed to restart farming.

Perhaps those in worst condition are in areas recently liberated from MNR control. In parts of the lower Zambezi Valley, just retaken by the

Mozambican army and its Zimbabwean allies, people are reported to be living on wild fruits and roots.

The problem of transporting food and other relief goods to this part of the country is a major headache. Access roads have been sabotaged, and the railway from the port of Beira to the Zambezi has been out of operation for the past three years. Other alternatives have to be considered, such as bringing goods in via Malawi, or using airdrops.

The international community has now woken up to the risks of widespread famine in Mozambique. An emergency donors' conference held in Geneva on 31 March under UN auspices was well attended and pledged aid valued at 209 million US dollars (out of a total of 244 million requested).

All aid will be gratefully received, of course, but one may legitimately doubt the motives of some of the major donors – particularly the US. The US will supply 195,000 tonnes of grain to Mozambique this year. Now the simplest way of doing this would be to purchase the grain in Zimbabwe and rail it over the border. Zimbabwe happens to have a grain surplus of some two million tonnes, and is anxiously looking for buyers.

But the US prefers to ship American grain from the other side of the globe. From the African point of view, the economics of this operation make no sense, and lead to the question – just who is this aid designed to benefit: hungry Mozambicans, or American farmers and the Republican Party of Ronald Reagan for whom they vote?

Mozambique needs real material assistance with no strings attached, and not the kind of aid which is really a disguised subsidy to American and European farmers. More importantly, it needs financial aid – such as the cancellation of its foreign debt. At three billion dollars, the debt is not large by international standards, but it is utterly beyond Mozambique's capacity to repay it. Interest payments due last year could not be met since they amounted to 200 per cent of Mozambique's export earnings.

Without the war, and South Africa's simultaneous economic pressures against Mozambique, the debt could easily have been serviced. Sweden and Denmark have cancelled Mozambique's commercial debt – other Western countries that profess concern for the front line states should follow this example, rather than pushing Mozambique into the clammy embrace of the IMF.