

MOZAMBIQUE

A shattered nation



A landmine victim tries out his artificial legs, above, while government soldiers, top, arrive in a camp where they harangue refugees.



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For 10 years it has been torn by civil war that has left 300,000 dead and 4 million facing starvation

Living death in Africa

Peter Goodspeed, The Star's Africa bureau chief, and photographer Frances Kelly visited Mozambique for an in-depth look at a nation ravaged by civil war and famine, a land where a child dies every six minutes of every day. This is the first of two reports

By Peter Goodspeed Toronto Star
NICUADALA. Mozambique — Sitting on a dirty bamboo mat in the shade of a huge acacia tree, Maria Arimando describes how a landmine blew off her left leg when she was three months' pregnant.

Her story, she says, isn't much different from those of many other people.

Ten months ago, her village, in Mozambique's central province of Zambezia, was invaded by bandits. "Men with guns came and they burned some of the houses," she says without emotion. "They shot people. They robbed people

and we fled. We hid in the bush." She was separated from her husband and three small children and went without food or water for three days.

Frightened and hungry, she decided to return to her thatched hut in search of her family and something to eat. At night, as she crept along a dusty footpath at the edge of her village, she was suddenly engulfed in an explosion of light and pain.

Her wounds have healed now. Her left leg is neatly cut off above the knee and she calmly breast-feeds a tiny boy as she tells her story in a town square littered with four rusting, abandoned trucks.

The air is pungent with smoke from cooking fires as half a dozen other one-legged men and women, all victims of similar landmine blasts, lean on their crutches in a tight semi-circle around Maria's mat. A group of naked children play in the dust nearby.

Maria's eyes fill with tears. "My heart is breaking," she cries. "I am here with only one child."

Since late last November, when Mozambique's brutal civil war shattered her leg and destroyed her life, Maria hasn't seen or

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Revenues shrink, but Mozambique spends 52% of its budget on war

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heard from her husband or her three other children. She doesn't know if they are alive or dead.

For four months she has lived in a crowded refugee transit camp waiting to be told it is safe to return home: waiting for Mozambique's war to end.

For 10 years Mozambique has been torn apart by an ugly war of attrition which has left 300,000 people dead, 1.5 million homeless and now threatens 4 million others with starvation.

The country's economy is shattered; its currency is almost worthless; its industries crippled.

Wracked by violence, misery and poverty, Mozambique has become one huge battlefield where horror, death and deprivation are commonplace.

The country's Marxist government, Frelimo (the Mozambique Liberation Front), controls only an archipelago of cities, towns and rural villages.

Right-wing, anti-government rebels of the Mozambique National Resistance (MNR or Renamo) claim to control 50 per cent of the rural areas.

No-man's land

The remainder of the country is a violently disputed no-man's land filled with abandoned and destroyed villages, wandering refugees and conflict.

In Nicuadala's refugee transit camp, in the very heart of central Mozambique, the war shows all its ugly scars.

The ragged, paved, but badly pot-holed road entering the town is guarded by soldiers, armed with AK-47 automatic rifles, who stand guard behind a single strand of rope stretched across the highway.

In the dusty town square, children from seven area refugee camps, which house almost 20,000 people, play quietly in the dirt, waiting, with bloated bellies, for a large white Volvo truck, donated by the Canadian government, to unload emergency food supplies, donated by the United States.

Under the shade of the square's huge acacia tree, adults blurt out tales of torture and despair.

Three men and two women solemnly stand in a line; turn around and display hideous jagged scars along the sides and back of their heads and necks.

Each individual has at least two, and in some cases four, of the wounds.

"The bandits (MNR rebels) hit us with machetes," explains one of the men, Castro Januario, 25.

On Dec. 28, a band of anti-government rebels stormed the small rural village of Alto Molocue just as the residents were preparing to go to mass at the local Catholic church.

"It was 10 o'clock and they tied us up and asked if we were not soldiers," Januario says, pointing to two other men in their late 20s or early 30s. "We were 10 persons in all, with four girls of 14. Two of the girls died in that place. They (the rebels) said you will die today, all of you."

The rebels tied their hostages up, forced them to kneel and then tried to behead them with machetes.

But the jungle knives weren't sharp enough to do the job and after taking several swipes at each of their victims, the rebels simply left them for dead.

According to Januario, two of the 14-year-old girls were then thrown into a nearby hut, which was set on fire.

Several other buildings in the village were torched before the rebels left, disappearing into the surrounding, drought-parched, thorn-bush countryside.

Paulino Fernando, 18, strips off his shirt to display a puckered scar immediately below his right breast, just inches from his heart. His back is covered with the ugly welts of a bullet exit wound.

In February this year, armed men raided his parents' farm in the Namarrol district of Zambezia, just as he was washing for breakfast.

He was tied up by the "bandits" and forced, along with other kidnap victims, to march into the bush. Along the way, the soldiers decided they didn't need Fernando, so they made him kneel down and shot him through the chest.

A school teacher from the same area, Martinho Bizueque, 24, insists Fernando was left lying unconscious and wounded in the bush for three days before he was found and rushed to hospital.

The raiders, he says, were 10 soldiers, armed with rifles and a bazooka. They were guided to the village by one of his former students, the 13-year-old son of a local resident. The student, who only weeks earlier had failed his exams, led the rebel soldiers on a house-to-house search for government school teachers.

Bizueque and the other teachers fled, so the attackers settled for burning several buildings and kidnapping 35 people.

'Armed bandits'

Similar stories are repeated by frightened refugees in emergency aid camps all over Mozambique. In most cases the attackers are simply referred to as "armed bandits" ("bandidos armandos").

Sometimes they are described as uniformed, heavily armed soldiers who speak African dialects common to tribes that live along the Malawi border to the west.

Often, they are depicted as scruffy men in dirty civilian clothes, who terrorize villagers by brandishing AK-47 rifles that apparently don't have any ammunition, since the attackers frequently use only knives, machetes or clubs to kill their victims.

But in all cases the "bandits" tactics are the same — to destroy, to terrorize, to rob and then to flee.

"It's the same story everywhere," says Canadian foreign aid worker Greg Keast, a 25-year-old water resources engineer from Sudbury who works for CUSO on a United Nations-sponsored water-well development project in the southern province of Inhambane.

"When the bandits come into a town or village the first thing they do is destroy anything of value," he says. "They'll burn schools, shoot up electric generators, attack hospitals, destroy health clinics, even poison wells. We've had a lot of experience with dead bodies

being put into wells to poison the water supply."

In some cases, the attacks are so focused in political motivation the victims don't know who is responsible for the raids or why they were attacked.

In most cases, however, anything and anyone connected with Mozambique's Marxist government is the obvious target. Teachers, nurses, state farm supervisors, government engineers, geologists and town administrators are regularly killed, kidnapped, maimed or mutilated in rebel attacks.

In addition, the raiders appear bent on destroying or stopping any government service in the countryside. To date, 2,058 or 34 per cent of Mozambique's primary schools have been destroyed in rebel raids and nearly a quarter of all the country's health clinics have been demolished.

Fear diseases

Health services have declined so drastically that international aid workers fear uncontrolled diseases will decimate Mozambique's weakened and rapidly growing refugee population.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimates up to half Mozambique's rural population may already have been turned into nomadic refugees by the war.

Other U.N. agencies say at least 400,000 Mozambicans have fled to neighboring countries to escape the war and 1.5 million others have been left homeless inside the country.

No one, however, has a complete or accurate picture of the problem, since huge tracts of Mozambique are totally inaccessible because of the war. Travel in the country is extremely restricted and risky.

Rebels frequently ambush cars and trucks on the roads; they regularly blow up bridges, have sabotaged all the major railways and often plant landmines on any road with a dirt surface.

Even Maputo, the capital, is not safe. A year ago, MNR rebels laid landmines on Maputo's most popular beach, which is often frequented by Soviet military advisers. Three people lost their legs.

Last month, a special air service was introduced to connect Maputo with Swaziland, because recurring rebel ambushes made it too dangerous to drive the 78 kilometres to the Swazi border.

The war has devastated Mozambique's already shaky economy.

Few exports

The country's ability to generate exports has almost collapsed, as revenue-producing industries and installations, such as railways, state farms, mines and factories have become prime targets for rebel attacks and sabotage.

While Maputo's cash-starved government is forced to spend 52 per cent of its budget fighting the MNR rebels, its ability to generate income has almost dried up.

Most mines in the country are closed or have been destroyed in the war. In Moatize, in Tete province, the government is sitting on a \$25 million stockpile of coal, which can't be shipped to market because rebels have kept the area's only railway closed for three years.

In northern Zambezia province, \$14 million worth of tea was recently destroyed when rebels invaded the area at harvest time. In Luabo, a town on the banks of the Zambezi River, one of the country's largest sugar mills has been destroyed.

The value of Mozambique's exports has dropped from \$280 million in 1980 to only \$79 million last year.

Evidence of the country's drastic economic decline is everywhere.

In Maputo, the busiest factory in the city is a Red Cross workshop that produces artificial limbs for war victims. Most other industrial production has ground to a halt from a lack of raw materials or spare parts.

Basic food items in Maputo are rationed. What is available in stores or markets is exorbitantly expensive. One kilogram of potatoes costs the average Mozambican the equivalent of three days' wages; a pack of cigarettes equals two days' work.

Maputo used to be a major tourist resort in Africa, attracting thousands of visitors a year with its sandy beaches, warm Indian Ocean currents, boulevard cafes, prawns and local beer.

Today, the city is littered with old cars, abandoned due to a lack of spare parts and fuel.

Everywhere, buildings and walls are covered with revolutionary slogans, some of which urge Mozambicans to "Take Part in the Struggle Against the Armed Bandits."

One of the most common slogans, however, is Frelimo's rallying cry: "A Luta Continua" — "The Struggle Continues."