

# MNR BANDIT WAR <sup>H 27/11</sup> 87

## Children caught up in vicious cause

### MAPUTO.

WHEN 14-year-old Jose is asked why he killed two people in cold blood he simply shrugs his shoulders and says: "They tried to escape and I was ordered to kill them. I had no choice."

Jose is one of 30 children caught up in an increasingly vicious civil war in Mozambique who are now the subject of a government appeal for international advice and assistance. He was kidnapped from his village early this year by the Mozambique National Resistance bandits.

The Minister of Health, Dr Fernando Vaz, said he wanted foreign help to deal with the children, whom he described as "psychologically traumatised" by their experiences in MNR camps.

Although the younger ones had been required to

do only non-lethal duties. Jose's story was typical of the older children's experiences in MNR camps.

The two people he was ordered to kill had been caught trying to flee from the bandit camp.

Refusal to obey would have meant severe punishment, such as flogging or mutilation, said Dr Vaz. Meanwhile, a film, shot in a reception centre in Maputo, showed one child with an ear hacked off and another with no fingertips.

The military training

appears to be systematic. Carlos (11), said that his training began with a pistol being put beside his ear, with the barrel pointed upwards. The pistol was then fired into the air.

There seems to be little doubt that the children are used in attacks. Survivors of the ambush of a civilian convoy 80 km north of Maputo on October 29 say they saw children who seemed as young as 10 or 11 taking part in the attack, in which 278 people were killed.

Dr Vaz said the government had no idea how many children were living in MNR camps in the country as a whole, but he made it clear that the 30 now in Maputo

were only a sample group.

He indicated that there could be hundreds nationwide. The minister also admitted that the government does not have a clear idea how to tackle the problem. This, he said, was why he had called in international agencies which might have relevant experience.

He said his ministry's social welfare department had been dealing with the 30 children in its care, and doctors and psychologists had been examining them. They had a temporary foster mother, a ministry worker experienced in dealing with problem children, he said.

The main difficulty, Dr Vaz said, was finding a long-term solution. In the

short term, special villages could be built where the children would at least have access to educational, recreational and medical facilities.

Some of the international organisations objected to this, saying that it would only lead to an increasing feeling among the children of "being different".

The representative of an Italian humanitarian organisation suggested that foreign aid for such villages could even lead the children into feeling like a privileged elite.

The minister replied that long-term government policy was to reintegrate the children into normal society but that something had to be done right now. "If not, the consequences for the future will be tragic," he said.

Dr Vaz asked the representatives to go back to their offices and think about the problem and the possible solutions. He said: "This is our first meeting on the subject. I'm sure it will not be the last." — Ziana-Reuter.