

Widowed mother struggles to survive in Mozambique's bandit war

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During a tour of areas badly hit by attacks from MNR bandits, Mozambican President Joaquim Chissano said he thought South Africa had reduced its support for the anti-government movement in recent months. But the fighting goes on, and has already displaced one-third of the country's 16 million people. General Neves Soares tells of a typical refugee — a widowed mother struggling to look after her family — and to an official trying to cope with the results of the mass movement of people.

CALCILDA Barreto sits outside a makeshift one-home watching her grandchildren playing with scraps of metal, bits of glass and rusty cans collected from a large

rubbish dump next door. A little girl, covered in a raw skin rash, lays the "toys" out carefully on an old groundsheet, and places flowers in the tin.

The rash started a week ago, explains Mrs Barreto, but they had not taken her to a doctor yet. The problem of providing food for the seven other family members was the first priority.

Mrs Barreto, a 47-year-old mother of 12 children, fled in April from her home in Boquetea, 27 km north of Maputo. The trouble started one night when she was woken by a loud bang of the door and an angry voice ordering her husband, Filomeno, to come outside.

As her husband dressed to see what the commotion was about, 13 men burst in and ransacked their home. Once the men had collected all they wanted, they forced Mrs Barreto and her daughter, Isabella, to carry the goods to their base, a night's walk away. Her husband was ordered to stay behind with three other armed men.

Common

This kind of incident has become commonplace in the 14-year-old war waged by the South African-backed Mozambique National Resistance (Renamo) bandits against the Mozambican government of President Joaquim Chissano. The struggle has left an estimated 100 000 people dead and forced one million Mozambicans to seek refuge in neighbouring countries.

A further five million of the country's 16 million people, like Mrs Barreto, have had to flee their home to live in other areas. The result is that Mozambique's 10 provincial capitals are now facing major problems of overcrowding.

"It has reached critical points," says António Fátima, who is responsible for

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planning in the Ministry of Mineral Resources.

Maputo, the country's fastest growing city, cannot cope with the influx of people. Says Mr Fátima: "People are settling anywhere, some in other people's courtyards."

Most areas where people are being forced to settle have no water supplies. Some areas are severe health hazards. Hospitals and schools cannot cope with the numbers. In most provincial capitals the school day is divided into three shifts in an attempt to accommodate more children.

Food shortages are also a problem. Because of the war the fertile land surrounding much of Maputo is lying idle and much rice and maize is either imported or provided by international donors.

Most migrants wage a daily struggle to make ends meet. With the 1987 economic recovery programme came the inevitable price increases, putting even basic items out of reach for most people.

Hazards

One of the most serious problems is the health hazard of settling in areas like the rubbish dump where Mrs Barreto lives along with hundreds of others. Rubbish dumped in this area for years and covered with soil.

Says Mr Fátima: "For many years nobody lived there because the soil

is poisonous. Now the migrants say they know the dangers but they will move only if we can provide another place."

It is particularly hazardous for the children who have no other place to play than on the dump. "Children play in the dirt and with the scraps they find in the area around."

Mrs Barreto did not want to leave her home in Boquetea. But the worsening security situation forced her to pack up her family and leave. The decision was a difficult one, she says. The MNR had released her the day after she was kidnapped, but had kept Isabella at the base.

While there were no obvious signs of mistreatment when her daughter, then 15, escaped six months later, Isabella refused to

speak about her experience. She says: "I remember nothing about it. I can't talk about it."

Mrs Barreto arrived home after the long walk to find the rebels had hacked her husband to death.

For almost three years, Mrs Barreto tried to carry on living in her home, but "the situation became very bad. The bandits kept coming back." Finally, she decided to leave her home and farm and move to Maputo.

Expensive

"I miss the farm," she says. "In my village you could get everything you need. But here everything costs money." She even has difficulty affording water. To use the water tap costs 800 meticals (about \$2) a month, a lot of money for most

families. Most days the family eats porridge and bread at midday.

"In the evening sometimes there is nothing to eat," she says. A member of the family is often sick with malaria, diarrhoea or a cold.

There is no simple remedy, concedes Mr Fátima. The ministry has implemented various projects to improve sanitation, but even those require space, which is scarce. Courses are also being run to improve the skills of some of the migrants but the only real solution is the end of the war.