

Mozambique — the forgotten war and famine

L.96: Guardian-W (Br), 91 04 28 (abr)

A DEADLY combination of drought and a 13-year bush war against the Frelimo government by Renamo guerrillas backed by powerful business interests in South Africa, the United States, Portugal, Saudi Arabia and Kenya, has left Mozambique's rural areas isolated and starving. The country, which now survives almost entirely on aid, is watching its children start to die of hunger.

Last month only 37 per cent of the emergency food pledged by the West had arrived. "The trend of donor response is going downwards year after year while the situation in the interior is deteriorating fast," says Kim Boldruc of the UN's emergency programme in Mozambique. "Donor fatigue" is the cynical phrase some aid officials use, while others speak of despair at a situation out of control.

Dr Hector Jalaipa, a Filipino with the US charity World Vision, worked in Ethiopia in 1974-85, but even that did not prepare him for the famine he is now witnessing. "I thought Ethiopia had hardened my heart," he says, "but among the lush green beauty here my heart has broken."

Half an hour out of the provincial capital of Quelimane along one of the few roads not closed by Renamo fighters or out of action because of their destruction of bridges, is the province's last feeding centre, next to the district hospital. Gaunt mothers sat in the hot tent holding shrivelled babies or toddlers to weak or stand or to focus their eyes. Eight times a day they try to feed them with LOA, the emergency mixture of milk, sugar and oil.

Frelimo's ideology may have been officially called Marxism-Leninism, but its continuing appeal in the countryside comes from the ideals of social justice and discipline still visible in desperately deprived villages such as Milange, up on the Malawi border and 350 impassable kilometres away from Wuelimane. The administrator, Raphael Jose Manso, sends to the airstrip an armoured personnel carrier which has to be pushed to start. It is the village's only transport apart from a tractor and two motorbikes given by aid agencies. Mr Manso walks everywhere in what was once a town of 300,000 people. In two years of Renamo occupation every building but the church was destroyed.

Guardian Weekly, London, 28 April 1991 (abridged)