

The forgotten shambles of Mozambique

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Julie Flint, just back from Derre, finds dignity among the agony of famine

THE De Havilland cargo plane, 1956 vintage, jolted to a halt a few yards before the rough clearing that passed for an airstrip ran into the bush. Half-naked men, women and children, many dressed only in bark, surrounded the plane as government soldiers began unloading sacks of maize. Few smiled; fewer still spoke.

In Derre village, a few hundred yards up a dirt track, Laureço Manuel Ventura, Coordinator for Emergencies in Mozambique's Zambezia province, addressed a crowd of half-starved peasant farmers seated in a semi-circle on the ground, like children in a schoolroom. 'Do you want to speak? Now is the time to tell the journalists what you are suffering.'

After several minutes' silence, an old woman stepped forward. As she did, the tattered blanket she wore as a skirt fell to the ground. She picked it up with enormous dignity, wrapped it around her waist and curtsied — a far more impressive figure than the portly bureaucrat despite her rags. 'My village was attacked by the bandits. I was separated from my family and walked here.'

An old man stepped up. 'The bandits came to my home when I was eating. They found salt and said: "You have salt. You are a capitalist." We walked to this place. But we don't want to be here. We want to be in our villages.'

Once a flourishing administrative centre in the heart of Zambezia, Derre is today a burnt-out shell surrounded by the South African-inspired rebels of Renamo and reachable only by air. The 800 or so peasant farmers who have congregated here live in mud huts in

the most abject poverty. With peace, Zambezia could feed the whole of Mozambique; without it, in a year of drought, aid rations have been halved and mass starvation threatens in a few months' time.

'If the donor community delays any longer people will die,' a senior government official warned, coolly aloof in a silk-lined suit and gold Cartier watch. 'Once again we will see levels of 30-40 deaths a day.'

In many regions of Africa, drought and civil war threaten to wipe out the progress achieved since the great famines of the 1980s. Large-scale famine is already emerging in Sudan and starvation is affecting south-eastern Ethiopia.

The people of the forgotten shambles that is Mozambique are the largest refugee group in the world after the Afghans, endlessly patient but almost beyond hope. Of a population of 16.3 million, 1.9 million have been driven from their homes and another 1.2 million have sought refuge in Malawi — which cannot offer the one thing the refugees know and love: land to work.

At Mankhokwe refugee camp in the toe of Malawi, a ragged old woman with rheumy eyes explained why 40 refugees a day are still leaving Mozambique. 'The bandits were killing people and forcing them to act as porters. They came back many times, stealing food.' (The government, too, is guilty: last year it amassed 50,000 people in the Mugulama area to deprive the rebels of a base; when aid agencies discovered the conglomeration, they found a 'disgusting' sight — 30 people dying a day.)

In this part of Malawi, Nsanje district, Mozambicans outnumber Malawians by 286,000 to 211,000. Cholera is endemic in the rainy season, measles at the end of the rainy season, pellagra and tuberculosis all the year. Half the patients in Nsanje district hospital suffer from Aids-



'When two elephants fight it's the grass that suffers': Mother and child in Namarro, fleeing Renamo guerrillas./Photograph by Graham Turner.

related diseases. But above all there is boredom and alcoholism. 'They take the sugar from their rations and ferment it with maize,' says a camp administrator. 'Distilled, it produces a brew that is 70° proof. Everyone drinks here. Even the very small children drink their parents' dregs.'

Graffiti on a mud hut in

Mankhokwe testify to the mood: 'The clock cannot be turned back. That's how it is.' And yet there is some hope that Mozambique may come back to life; that Renamo, stripped of official South African support, may be getting into the political game after more than a decade of war. Not only have US-sponsored peace talks in Rome

begun to make progress, but aid officials say Renamo appears to be going on the stump. 'In the last few months Renamo has been giving tools to the people. Local commanders have been making speeches asking the people for forgiveness and there are rumours that one very violent commander in Zambezia has been dismissed.'

For the moment, however, the agony of Mozambique continues, magnified by the search for peace. To strengthen its hand in Rome, or so the theory goes, Renamo has launched a new offensive, ambushing trucks, attacking far-flung villages and sabotaging the main high-tension power line to the capital, Maputo. At the same

time, hungry government soldiers are looting aid convoys on an unprecedented scale.

For the ordinary people, government or rebels matter little. The only thing that matters is peace — and a return to the land. 'When two elephants fight,' they say in Mozambique, 'it's the grass that suffers.'