

Southern Africa News Features

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NAMPULA: WHERE THOUSANDS LIVE IN THE BUSH TO ESCAPE RENAMO

by Hugh McCullum

The only thing that seems to be moving in the green forest pierced with island mountains of granite is the shadow of our twin-engined Islander aircraft.

We pass over the vast canopy of forest, circle once and land at a rough dirt airstrip to begin a journey into the darkness of a brutal war.

Governor Alfredo Gamito of the north-central province of Nampula steps onto the dusty gravel to be greeted by about a thousand ragged people who have walked five kilometres from Ribaue, the district administrative centre.

Gamito runs the 1,000-square kilometre province of 3.5 million people but in the last five or six months it's been a tough -- some would say, losing -- battle. His provincial capital, Nampula city, is about 120 kilometres away.

Ribaue is caught in the middle of the war with Renamo. It has 23,000 recently displaced people, no medical facilities and a terrible shortage of water and food. There are no doctors, no nurses and no midwives.

All the main buildings, built during Portuguese colonial times, are bombed-out shells. The hospital has no roof, its gutted interior piled high with rubble. Renamo destroyed it in 1987.

Fourteen thousand people trekked in here on foot to escape a major offensive six months ago at Lalaua. They walked through the bush for 60 kilometres after Renamo massacred "God only knows how many people."

There's no housing. Twenty-three thousand people sleeping under trees, many wearing only bark clothing. No one knows for certain how many people encircle the tiny town. No one knows when Renamo may hit Ribaue.

Gamito listens to the reports of his administrators at Ribaue. A small wreath of flowers sits on a table in front of him. The Canadian observers are told that 50 percent of Nampula's fertile agriculture should come from this area but there's little sign of it.

There's no petrol available. Bombed-out roads are hard to repair. Vehicles can't travel except to carry emergency food supplies of which there's always a shortage. The relief lorries are ambushed regularly, the bridges are blown up. Last year Mozambique got only 40 percent of what it asked from the international appeal for emergency food aid. Now at Ribaue, 14,000 more people are hungry.

The planting season is about to start but there are no tools, hoes, machetes to till the soil, all stolen by the *bandidos*.

People are sick with diarrhea from drinking bad water and eating leaves, grass and green mangoes. There's no medication.

Schools are wrecked and those left intact have no resources except a few dedicated teachers.

We drive 35 kilometres in the heavily-armed convoy to Iapala a key railroad town on the line from Malawi to Nacala on the Indian Ocean. It takes four hours. Everywhere people line the roads, hungry and tired staring at the strangers who rumble by, stopping to see a wrecked agricultural college, watching a bore hole bring in clean water, hearing the governor promise that Nampula will recover -- but only when there's peace.

He has little left to offer, but hope.

Renamo has at least 12 bases in the province, supplied by shadowy groups from Kenya and South Africa along the isolated coast. Some observers say the rebels are trying to establish a new headquarters here, playing on peoples' traditional disaffection with Maputo and the south.

The capital city, Nampula, had a population of 40,000 during Portuguese rule. Today it has 500,000, as people flee the countryside to safety around the "concrete city". But Nampula has water and sewage for less than 100,000, and electricity and water supplies are out for days.

In the countryside, the emergency food programme reaches 230 villages. Nearly 300,000 rely totally on the imported maize for survival. Hundreds of thousands of others are beyond its reach, eking out an existence growing cassava and vegetables on little plots of land, never knowing when bandits and thieves will attack, stealing what they can and destroying the rest.

"We can never forget the war, it is with us every minute," says Gamito. Because of it democratization is embryonic, development restricted to a few green zones around the cities. "Our institutional capacity is so weak," the governor explains.

Whole areas are controlled by Renamo where the only assistance for people comes from the International Committee of the Red Cross. Escapees tell terrible stories of brutality and deprivation.

Marrere has a large hospital about 25 kilometres from Nampula City. It was built by Catholic missionaries and is now run by the government on a budget of 11 million metecais-a-year (about US\$7,000).

Sister Michaela, the director, describes a recent Renamo raid. It happened at 4 a.m. Two patients were killed, three more kidnapped and the remaining 60 in-patients ran away when the army garrison guarding the hospital could not drive the marauders away.

"They stole all the bedding, mattresses, buckets, dishes, clothing and medicines. They burned all the drugs and smashed the equipment. We have nothing now to be a hospital for 100 beds and 600 daily outpatients, mostly people suffering from malnutrition, diarrhea and tuberculosis -- disease of the poor."

She takes us to the medicine cabinet, its frame now smashed. Inside sit two bottles of aspirin. "How do we run a hospital with that?"

A boy sits on one of the many vacant beds -- the people are afraid to stay in the hospital because of the bandits -- he has a bullet in his back and rough bandages cover a huge slash across his abdomen.

His name is Sylvestre, he's 14. He was staying near the hospital with his father and mother that same morning. He sobs in pain and fear: "Three men kicked down the door and stabbed my father to death with a bayonet. They started shooting and killed my sister. Five other people nearby were killed. When I tried to run they stabbed me too and then I got hit by a bullet."

Anastasia Aberta is a young mother with a sad, pock-marked face and sick-looking eyes. She was kidnapped in the same raid and, with her two children, forced to carry loot "far away" to a Renamo camp.

One of her children was already sick with diarrhea and on the way died because they were given no food or water.

"The countryside belongs to Renamo, not Frelimo," she said. One night the bandits were having a party. "They danced and drank beer and when they fell asleep I took my baby and escaped." It took her four days of hiding in the bush, eating leaves to get back to the relative safety of Nampula. She'd been beaten and her back was still a mass of bruises and welts.

Around Nampula city the government has established 10 centres for the dislocated people. Each morning very early at sunrise, the people walk out to green zones where organizations like Cooperation Canada-Mozambique (COCAMO) and CARE Canada have helped supply tools and seeds for gardens to supplement the emergency food programme.

People walk as much as 20 kilometres to reach their land, never knowing what they'll find. Then at night they walk back to the relative safety of Nampula city where there is some protection.

Some people have huts on their land and slip into the bush at night to sleep, to save energy and watch their precious crops. One night Puamvene Vicene and two of her children were asleep in the trees.

"Suddenly our hut was hit by a mortar, then another. The bandits stole all our food and then burned the crops. My 11-year-old was caught running and he is still with them three months later. I don't know whether he's alive or dead."

She stoops over and picks up a handful of charred cashew nuts and points to little mounds of ash, the remains of her rice. Her husband has disappeared and she has lost everything. But, she will start again, with help from COCAMO – a hoe, some seeds.

Canada, through COCAMO, works in Nampula. Last year it contributed \$44 million (its largest African donation) to Mozambique, \$2 million to the consortium of 20 churches and NGOs that work in Nampula.

The successes are small, but significant: a functioning co-op that supplies inputs and handles distribution of food, a drilled well, new huts, a school, toilets for the ever-expanding refugee camps.

But, say the COCAMO volunteers, they keep hope. "This country has so much potential and we do get things done," they say, pointing to the 1,800 tonnes of food aid-a-month that does get through -- some of the time.

COCAMO people stay even though the pay is low, they can't drink the water and they must drive over back-bending roads in bandit country.

"It may be the poorest country in the world but there is potential here. We have to see it as a place of hope, not hopelessness.

"If only we could stop the fighting, Nampula would become again Mozambique's breadbasket."

There's only hope. Hope for peace. (SARDC)