

Elderly Suffer In Aftermath Of War

On 1 October, the Mozambique government and the Renamo rebels signed a ceasefire to end the 16-year-old war. But the damage done to the country's infrastructure and social fabric will take a long time to repair. One of the worst affected groups in Mozambique are the elderly, more and more of whom are being abandoned by the community. This, reports Gemini News Service, is a marked change in a country where the elderly are traditionally looked after and respected.

By Ruth Ansah Ayisi

CATIK NGUAFUME HAD HOPED to spend his old age with his wife and children and grandchildren. The couple were farmers and had lived in what was a closely-knit community in the mountainous locality of Catandika, in Mozambique's central province of Manica.

But the security of family life appears to be over for Nguafume. Today, he is alone. "I just want to be relieved from my misery," said Nguafume, who awkwardly manoeuvres with two sticks. "the only solution for me is to die."

Nguafume's wife abandoned him three years ago when he became partially paralysed. "She no longer wanted me, and took our two children with her."

"Before, my wife and I had a good marriage. We had seven children together. How could we have had that number of children if our marriage had not been good?"

Five of their children died from various illness: this is not so unusual in Mozambique, a country with one of the world's highest child mortality rates.

When Nguafume began to lose the use of his legs he sought hospital treatment, but a series of injections and tablets proved ineffective and his condition deteriorated.

To add to his walking difficulty, his feet are swollen by termites which have crawled under his toenails. "I can't even return to the hospital to get rid of the termites, because I can't manage it with these sticks. It's too far. So I just boil water when the pain is too bad, to pour over my feet, hoping it may kill some of the insects."

"My wife and children live nearby, but they never visit me. After all these years I have lost hope. Even my neighbours don't visit me."

Whatever the reason for Nguafume's isolation, he is abandoned in an African country where the elderly are traditionally looked after and respected. Casting off the elderly in the past has been seen as a selfish European phenomenon, yet evidence shows that it has spread to the African continent.

The president of the African Gerontological Society, Nana Apt, puts the trend down to "modern economics."

"Twenty years ago, the general view would be that you must look after your father because he fathered you - even a father who had not looked after his son or a daughter," says Apt, a professor at Ghana's Legon University.

"Now it is a question of modern economics. People are working, they themselves do not have enough sustenance. The salaries they are getting do not keep them going, neither themselves nor their own immediate family. Now, it becomes easier for children to say: 'Look, I can't because they themselves cannot even cope.'"

But the crisis facing the elderly in Africa is still largely hidden. The proportion of elderly people in Africa is low - a symptom of high birth rates and a short life expectancy - about 49 years, and around 70 per cent of Africa's elderly live in the rural areas, giving them a chance to at least grow their own food.

The problem of abandoned elderly is more visible in Mozambique, the world's poorest country, where over 70 per cent of the country's 15.7 million people live in absolute poverty.

In the countryside, where some 80 per cent of the population live, the 16-year-old war between the Mozambique government and rebels of the Mozambique National Resistance (Renamo) combined this year with the effects of the worst drought in living memory has driven millions of people to the very brink of survival.

The conflict has cost a million lives and the drought is threatening the lives of a further three million. The drought has burnt up all the crops in Catandika, so Nguafume, like its other inhabitants, is dependent on emergency food aid for survival. The war split up the community: many of the people living in Catandika are displaced, seeking refuge from the conflict. Under such conditions a community spirit, where the fitter members look after the more needy, like the old, is difficult to foster.

Social Action, a department in the Ministry of Health, recognises this problem, and one of the target groups for their assistance are the abandoned elderly.

Nguafume is one of 80 old people they are helping who, for differing reasons, have been abandoned. They receive free hospital treatment, food aid and have visits from the social worker, Jimo Miranda.

In the cities, life is only a little better despite the fact that the security situation is more stable and drought has a less direct impact. Prices are far beyond the reach of the average citizen owing to the World Bank and International Monetary Fund economic recovery programme. *Gemini*