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African civilians suffering heavily in Mozambique war

On Wednesday the Portuguese Embassy in London informed The Times that a Mozambique visa could not be issued to Mr Michael Knipe, our Southern Africa Correspondent. Mr Knipe has now been allowed to enter Mozambique. This is his first report.

From Michael Knipe
Tete, Mozambique, July 20

An African boy, aged five, was blown ~~by~~ ~~away~~ by a land mine and two Portuguese soldiers were shot and wounded

in a Frelimo ambush near here.

All three were admitted to the Tete regional hospital which I had visited less than an hour before, seeking verification of the alleged massacre of 400 villagers near Tete on December 16 last year.

My visit threw no immediate light on the massacre allegation, but it provided a vivid glimpse of the harsh realities of the war between the Portuguese Army and the Frelimo guerrillas in Mozambique, and its effects on the African civilians.

After receiving a message advising me that new casualties had just been admitted, I returned to the hospital where I found the boy whimpering and trembling on a stretcher. There was a blood stained bandage around the stump of his right ankle where his foot had been blown off by an antipersonnel land mine.

Through swing doors I was able to see a black parachutist lying on an operating table with a wound where a military surgeon was attempting to locate a

bullet which had entered his back.

A white soldier with a bandage around his right arm where a bullet had hit him, explained that they had been wounded while riding on top of a supply truck between Mende and Chosoro about 20 miles south of Tete on the edge of the triangle of land where the massacre is said to have taken place at the village of Wiriyanu.

The soldiers' truck had been forced to stop because a tree trunk was blocking the road.

Attached to it was a Frelimo message warning the troops that next time, instead of receiving a warning they would be killed, apparently a psychological tactic frequently employed by Frelimo.

The Portuguese soldiers, members of the elite special parachute group, sprayed the area with mortars in the hope of hitting the Frelimo guerrillas in the bush.

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About six miles farther on, however, they ran into an enemy ambush in which the two parachutists were wounded, the black soldier seriously.

Sitting passively outside the operating theatre was the mother of the boy casualty. The youngest of her four children was slung on her back.

With an African male nurse acting as interpreter, she explained how her son, Catayene, had been playing with his friends while she tended the family crop of mealies near by on the outskirts of her village.

She did not hear the land mine explode, she said, but came across her child bleeding and crying. A soldier in the village called a military helicopter which flew them to the hospital.

The woman, who lives in a traditional village, rather than one of the aldeamentos, or protected villages, said it was the first time a mine had exploded in the vicinity.

The extent to which the African civilian villagers are the victims of Mozambique's guerrilla war was apparent from the number of patients at the

hospital without limbs as a result of land mine explosions.

The Portuguese say that Frelimo plant the mines at villages where the local people fail to give them food or other assistance.

Dr Henrique Feitor, the acting director of the hospital and a surgeon, said that in the past four weeks there had been an increasing number of civilian war casualties. The number of cases varied, but there might be two or three every few days.

On Monday last week, he said, 18 wounded villagers were admitted. They had been shot and 10 others had been killed outright when their village, close to the Malawi border, failed to provide food for the Frelimo guerrillas.

The doctor introduced me to two African farmers who had just returned after each had been fitted with an artificial leg.

They had both been passengers on a bus which had been blown up by a land mine near their farms at Villa Coutinho, a few miles from the Malawian border. Before that they had never seen a Frelimo guerrilla, they said.

Another patient I met was a sprightly but very old man with

a grizzled beard and grey hair, who was being treated for a stab wound. Through an African interpreter, he said that two Frelimo men had taken some of his cattle. Later four Frelimo men came, and when he said that he was ready to die to protect his cattle they stabbed him.

The man did not know how old he was, but he said proudly that he had 10 children. He lived in a traditional village. When I asked which sort of village he preferred, an aldeamento or a traditional one, he said he would feel more protected in an aldeamento.

Doctor Feitor said more than 40 victims of Frelimo mines or bullets were at the hospital at present, with about 20 of them awaiting transfer to Lourenço Marques, where they would receive artificial limbs. The hospital took all the war victims in the Tete district, soldiers, civilians and guerrillas.

Asked if there were any Frelimo men at the hospital at the moment, he said he thought not. When had the hospital last had a Frelimo patient? Dr Feitor said he could not say because he was not concerned with the status of his patients.