

Gdn. 20/10/86

Defiant Maputo belies SA propaganda

From Paul Fauvet
in Maputo

THE Mozambican capital is a city which, according to its South African neighbours, is under siege, running out of food, and about to fall into the hands of the rebels of the Pretoria-backed Mozambique National Resistance (MNR).

Visitors, however, walking around central Maputo at midnight on any Saturday, will hear not gunfire but loud music blaring out of dozens of flats the sound of young Mozambicans enjoying themselves. They may have had to pay black market prices to acquire the beer, but they are not going to let South African threats spoil their Saturday night fun.

The new city regulations, ordering people to turn the sound down after 10 o'clock, are ignored.

Maputo — with its imposing tree-lined avenues, magnificent views over the Indian Ocean, and well-tended municipal gardens — does not feel like a city at war.

The people are relaxed and now used to living with shortages and rationing. Even when the MNR was making

regular night-time hit-and-run raids into the western suburbs there was no panic — although some people from these areas stopped sleeping at home and stayed in relatives' houses in other parts of the city.

Since March, when Mozambican troops and militiamen trapped one of these MNR raiding parties and killed 29 rebels. The rebels have lost their taste for nocturnal forays into the capital. Now the Government is concerned that the South African military may launch a direct attack on Maputo. The Security Minister, Mr Sérgio Vieira has warned that a commando group has already infiltrated the city, and a government communique issued on October 11 spoke of the possibility of South African air raids.

The statement caused no noticeable rise in tension. The only tangible result of the Government's call for a state of permanent alert is that there are more spot checks on the streets at night as policemen or soldiers stop passers-by and ask to see their identification documents.

An official of the ruling

Frelimo Party in charge of the city's defence, Mr Aurelio Manhica, has announced refresher courses for militia members, and promised them more weapons.

Despite frequent announcements from MNR spokesmen in Lisbon that Maputo is "totally encircled," all the roads and railways out of the city are open.

Lorryloads of vegetables come into the city every day from the fertile Limpopo valley, some 100 miles to the north. Traffic to and from Swaziland and South Africa continues, despite the risk of ambush. Military escorts are provided on the stretches of road considered most dangerous.

The latest incident was a mine explosion last Wednesday on the railway to South Africa, which derailed a goods train. It was little more than a minor hiccup — the line was repaired and functioning again within 10 hours.

Nobody starves in Maputo. A rationing system, in force since 1981, provides a basic minimum of rice, maize, fish, cooking oil, sugar and, occasionally, beans at heavily

subsidised prices. According to Unicef, the ration card supplies 50 per cent of a family's food needs for 7 per cent of the average wage.

The other 50 per cent is rather more difficult. The authorities try to channel scarce supplies towards the network of consumer co-operatives. An *ad-hoc* rationing system operates in the co-ops.

Basically, what is available is divided by the number of members a co-op has. Thus a co-op member might get, in a week, half a dozen eggs, a packet of biscuits, and a couple of bottles of beer. His purchases vary with the size of his family.

Processed foods appear and disappear depending on the availability of raw materials (and of packaging) in the processing plants.

Fruit and vegetables are on offer in the city's many markets, but often at astronomical prices. The state fruit and vegetable company, Hortofruticola, wages a relentless battle to push prices private stallholders and undercutting them.

Anyone with dollars or

South African rands can use the Loja Franca (foreign currency shop). This supermarket, poorly stocked by European standards, appears a veritable Aladdin's cave when compared with the half-empty shelves in most shops.

The supply system is now being rethought, and attempts are underway to link food purchases directly to workplaces.

The heavy subsidies on basic foods runs counter to the economic orthodoxy of the International Monetary fund, and are doubtless one of the issues now being fought in the long drawn-out negotiations between Mozambique and the IMF.

As for crime here, there are plenty of burglaries, an endemic black market, but remarkably little violence.

In short, this is not a besieged city, and, contrary to the wishful thinking of much of the South African media, the central Government is not about to collapse.

Officials believe that only a direct South African invasion could endanger the survival of Mr Samora Machel's Government.