

# Dashed Hopes

**Optimism is crumbling as Mozambicans see local and international forces whittle away prospects of recovery**

**T**he main news bulletin on Mozambican television has been dominated recently by the Gulf War. There is a glimpse of CNN footage dubbed in Portuguese, news briefs and interviews with Mozambicans on their views about the conflict. Many people interviewed speak of the serious consequences for their country, one of the poorest in the world.

Fuel supplies in Maputo were running short last month as they have, on and off, since November. Some people have been leaving their cars overnight, in the queues, with a domestic employee inside. Air-lifts of emergency food and medical supplies have almost come to a standstill, and it is becoming extremely difficult to get on a flight out of Maputo to the provinces, a relatively safe way to travel because the civil war has made many roads hazardous.

Since independence in 1975, Mozambique has enjoyed heavily subsidised oil supplies from the Soviet Union - the country's main supplier - but that agreement came to an end last year. Moscow, facing a severe economic crisis of its own, told Mozambique and its other Third World allies that future oil deliveries will be based on their ability to pay. Gone too are the easy credit terms and, from middle of last year, Mozambique has had to pay for its fuel with hard currency.

In the long-term, however, the effects of the expiration of the Soviet fuel deal are likely to become more critical. It is officially estimated that the annual bill for Mozambique's oil could soar to 230 million US dollars, an additional 60-80 million US dollars. This is more than twice what Mozambique earns from

its commodity exports.

Mozambique is also reeling under another blow - the reunification of Germany. The collapse of bilateral agreements with the then German Democratic Republic (GDR) is expected to cost Mozambique 30 million dollars per year.

The human cost has been painful. Some 16,000 Mozambicans working in the GDR had their contracts abruptly ended last year. By March it is expected that 11,000 Mozambicans will have returned to Mozambique joining the swelling ranks of the unemployed, now officially estimated at 150,000 people. Many of the returnees have already vented some of their frustrations by taking part in demonstrations at the end of last year, demanding jobs and money still owed to them.

The Ministry of Labour has since cleared a large number of the debts to those who have returned. Now the government faces the outstanding debts to Germany of over 350 million US dollars, which was being partly serviced by the migrant workers.

Yet, despite the contract being broken, the Mozambican government is unlikely to take any legal action against Germany. "We want to develop friendly relations with Germany," said Mozambique's Finance Minister, Abdul Osman, in a recent interview. "What is the use of going to the law when you can gain some other things?"

But for most of the Mozambicans who were working in Germany, the return home has been difficult.

Ana Chelene, 24, thought she still had two years left of her seven-year contract in the GDR as a worker in a clothes factory. But she was forced to return last September after just one month's notice. "I was shocked because it was

not my plan," she said. "I thought I had another two years to organise my life - my future. But in the event I only had a month to prepare. Life is difficult here. I can't just sit here with my arms crossed. I also have my mother to support."

The economic prospects look grim. Last year, Mozambique's annual growth rate was the lowest since the World Bank and IMF sponsored Economic Recover Programme was launched in 1987. Most urban workers have become poorer in real terms in the last few years as prices continue to push upwards. The minimum wage is roughly 35 US dollars per month. Inflation is over 30 per cent.

Optimism, following the limited ceasefire agreement, at the end of last year, that the war would end soon, was dampened when the fifth round of peace talks in Rome, between the government and RENAMO rebels, which were meant to be dealing with "political issues", were suspended on January 30, with little progress.

"It's difficult to negotiate with an organisation that doesn't know what it wants," said a senior diplomat in Maputo. "RENAMO is feeling isolated internationally."

So while the lengthy peace process continues, the 85 per cent of the people who live in the countryside suffer. The war has prevented millions of people from farming, and one quarter of Mozambique's people are dependent on international food aid for their survival.

The government has decided not to issue a new emergency appeal, but instead donors responded to a World Bank consultative group meeting in Paris on December 12 last year with about 1.2 billion US dollars annually in pledges for 1991-3, mainly in the form of a grant and support of the balance of payments.

But whether what is pledged will be delivered after the outbreak of war in the Gulf is now a big question. "I was optimistic, but now with the Persian Gulf (war), I don't think it will be the same," said Osman. "Life is going to be more difficult now." ● Ruth Ayisi