

# 'We are glad we can smile again ...

Maputo is a city re-awakening after 16 years of fear, war and intimidation. ERIC JANSSEN of The Argus Africa News Service reports that residents are relishing a new-found freedom and they are cautiously optimistic about a future offering peace and prosperity.

ONLY a few weeks ago the parties at war, Renamo and Frelimo, decided to hang up their rifles, rockets and mortars, but already there is a tangible difference in Maputo.

Residents are crawling out of their shells, rediscovering what freedom of speech and movement are all about and hard at work at recreating a normal life which was abruptly taken away from them shortly after independence from Portugal in 1975.

"People are no longer afraid to discuss their political feelings and beliefs. In the past we never knew who we were talking to and everyone was scared of intimidation and attacks, but now people say openly who they will support in an election," says Carlos Fernandes, a street vendor.

"Although there is still the fear that the ceasefire won't last, people believe everyone is tired of war and that peace is here to stay.

"Personally, I've had it up to here with war," says the 23-year-old man, pointing above his head.

"War produces no winners, only losers ... and of those we have enough in Mozambique," he adds with a wry smile.

Residents also tell you they can now return to the activities and habits they enjoyed 16 years ago.

Visiting friends and family in the rural areas — which until recently was an open invitation to be robbed at best, killed at worst — is now suddenly a reality again.

A local fondly tells how a relative last week went to visit people close to the border between Mozambique and Swaziland.

"Just before nightfall on the way back his car broke down. There was nothing he could do but sleep in the car and fix it the next morning. The amazing thing is that he woke up the next morning, fixed the car and made it

back safely to Maputo.

"A few weeks ago he would certainly have been killed. This was our Beirut, but now it's safe."

Even visiting loved ones or a night out in the suburbs of Maputo, which until a few weeks ago was impossible for fear of Renamo soldiers looting the area, is now on the diary again.

Fears still abound, but the general feeling is that Mozambique will slowly return to its former self, a rich and successful country offering its citizens prosperity and peace.

"We are glad we can smile again and walk safely in the streets. Now we hope jobs and tourists will soon follow.

"We have suffered a lot during the war. Almost no work and very little money, so we are very anxious to get on with our lives," says Carlos.

The end to warfare has not only brought smiles and people back on to the streets, but has also sent many city folks packing their bags — ready to return to their native rural towns.

"I know of people who were separated from their parents or children during the war — and the two not having seen each other for years because of the danger of travelling.

"Now many people who were forced to stay in Maputo and Beira want to return to their home towns to continue farming. Mozambique is, after all, a very rural and agricultural country."

Maputo city officials confirm they expect a departure of many of the two-million residents once the ceasefire is regarded as final, the outflow in turn creating opportunities for the many other unemployed people in the city.

Ask who the man-in-the-street would like to win a forthcoming election and the answers are laced with indifference.

"What does it matter? Nobody really cares, as long as we can lead normal lives again. At the moment, both

Renamo and Frelimo claim they won the war and we say to them 'sure, you won it' but we couldn't really care.

"There are some people bitter at relatives or friends having been killed by either party, but most people feel we should put the war behind us and look to the future."

And who can blame them? Sixteen years of abnormality, fear and a lifestyle in hiding, is a long time in anyone's language.

But while the people appear to have adapted remarkably quickly to the political changes, the city itself may take years and millions of rands to regain its former status.

It takes only a few hours to see what 16 years of civil war have done to Mozambique.

Once regarded as a paradise — for inhabitants and tourists — the capital of Maputo, which, according to locals, suffered the least in the power struggle, is now a mere shadow of its past.

Shacks and shabby buildings — on a par with the worst you'll see in a South African township — litter the immediate city surroundings, the monotony broken only by rusted wrecks of motor vehicles and defunct war helicopters, some without rotor blades and wheels — commodities for which the city's residents found more practical uses.

City streets are relatively clean — although full of potholes — but most buildings (commercial and private) could do with a good lick of paint.

The decay, waste and intrinsic sadness of a previously glorious city having gone to ruin nobody will be able to argue away, but a positive note is the noticeable willingness of residents to rebuild.

With the right frame of mind — and financial backing — Maputo may well reflect in years to come the spirit of its people ... to live and let live.