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COMMENT:

MOZAMBIQUE'S DEVELOPMENT PROSPECTS.

27.4.88.

The recent history of Mozambique provides what is perhaps the most tragically ironic example in the Third World of a nation paying the price for leadership failures. Few countries in Africa have been so favourably situated for massive economic development with outside assistance, as has Mozambique since the signing of the Nkomati Accord with South Africa. Instead, its economic deterioration has continued until it is today classified as one of the half a dozen poorest countries in the world.

Hence the cryptic note in a report this week that Mr Gavin Relly, Chairman of South Africa's biggest company Anglo American, had held top-level talks in Maputo on economic development projects. Mr Relly had indicated in discussions with President Chissano and others that his company might be interested in investing in forestry, agriculture and natural gas projects. But the report also noted that the talks had dealt with the necessary conditions for such investment - including the security situation.

The mission by the head of Anglo American was one of many that have been undertaken, mainly from South Africa but from western countries as well, since the Nkomati Accord was signed four and a half years ago. From South Africa initiatives have been launched by official bodies and the private sector in fields ranging from agriculture and tourism to commercial, industrial and infrastructural undertakings. The cumulative effect of such initiatives could have transformed Mozambique's economy and its people's prospects, particularly in the years when the Frelimo government was making an effort to abandon the more damaging practices introduced during the early infatuation with Marxism. Even now the spirit of Nkomati persists, as evidenced by Mr Relly's visit and South Africa's recent agreement to co-operate in trying to restore power supplies from Cahora Bassa.

But Mozambique was unable to rise to the occasion, unable to take advantage of the flood of development opportunities that opened up after Nkomati. A barrier that not even the most well-meaning efforts could penetrate was created by the failure of Frelimo's leadership to deal with the chronic instability in the country and ensure order and security, whether by military means or through a settlement with the rebel movement Renamo. It has lacked either the strength to defeat the rebels or the statesmanship to negotiate an end to the conflict.

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Insecurity and misery have mushroomed. This month the results of a survey by the American State Department revealed that refugees fleeing from Mozambique into neighbouring countries had increased by 300 per cent in the past year. Their number is expected to exceed one-million by the end of the year. The country's Ministry of Trade has just disclosed that it will need over 900 000 tons of emergency food aid to feed six-million people during the next twelve months. One-third of all children die before they reach the age of five years - a figure matched only by Angola and Afghanistan. •Nearly nine out of ten Mozambicans do not have access to safe drinking water.

The people have paid heavily for the opportunities wasted by their warring leaders. Nor can their prospects improve, however much outsiders may wish to assist, until those leaders finally face up to the real causes of the national tragedy.

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