

Murders at SA Border

Corpses of Mozambican citizens have been found in the river Incomati on the border with South Africa, a resident of the border town of Ressano Garcia told AIM in the first week of September.

Paulo Candeia, 40, a fisherman who also works at the Ressano Garcia railway station, said that the bodies were those of Mozambicans who had crossed the border in order to flee from attacks by the South African backed MNR bandits.

Mr Candeia said that he had caught some corpses in his fishing nets that bore signs of bullet wounds and of torture. "Many" bodies had been found, he said, but he could not give an exact figure. He said that he had seen several bodies floating in the river in July shortly after an MNR attack on Ressano Garcia.

The discovery of bodies showing signs of torture, and coming from the other side of the frontier is no secret for people living in this town," said Mr Candeia. He claimed that the Mozambicans had been tortured by South African security forces inside the Kruger National Park, which is close to the Mozambican border, but he was not able to provide hard evidence to back up this statement.

The question of mysterious killings first came to public attention during the Frelimo Party Fifth Congress in late July, when a delegate from Ressano Garcia denounced the discovery of bodies floating in the Incomati.

Mr Candeia's account is in stark contrast to South African claims that they have always provided good treatment for Mozambicans who flee over the border to escape bandit raids.

The bandits have attacked Ressano Garcia three times this year—on 27 April, 19 July and 17 August. At least 24 people died in these attacks.

The first raid caused the greatest destruction, with the wrecking of four railway locomotives valued at US\$6 million. Part of the station was destroyed, including a store where miners returning from South Africa left their possessions.

Local residents told AIM at the time that there was direct South African participation in this attack. Bandits were unloaded from a South African army vehicle, and South African troops shone massive searchlights into the town to assist the bandits in their looting. The South Africans maltreated people who tried to cross the border to escape.

In the two subsequent attacks, however, the public face of the South African authorities changed, possibly because of the bad publicity they received in April, and residents of the town testify that many of those who crossed the border were well-treated.

Zilmira Matsinhe, a 36-year-old widow with five children, was one of those who crossed the border in the August attack. She said the South Africans switched off the power to the electrified fence so that people fleeing the bandits would not be killed.

The South Africans provided shelter and food for the refugees, and gave first aid to the injured. They were all repatriated the following morning.

The local administrator, Domingos Dubeque, confirmed that there appeared to have been a change in South African attitude between the April and July raids. "In April we saw that at least some individuals on the other side of the border were supporting the bandits," he said. "But more recently, when there have been attacks, the South Africans have opened the border, and they have sheltered our people."

However, Mr Candeia's story indicates that not all those who cross the border are so fortunate.

Despite the bandit threat, there is constant movement in Ressano Garcia, and this small town's bars and restaurants enjoy a thriving business—much of it from Mozambican migrant workers going to or coming from the South African gold mines.

Every working day, Mozambicans line up at the immigration post, documents in hand, ready to depart for the mines. A short distance away, returning miners huddle on the Ressano Garcia railway station awaiting the train to Maputo.

But there are other returning Mozambicans here, too, and they are much less fortunate than the miners. These are peasant families repatriated from South Africa, after crossing the border further north.

According to Mr Dubeque, an average of 200 people are repatriated per week. Some of these are illegal migrants who had crossed the border in search of work, but many are people from Gaza province who fled into the Transvaal to escape the war.

In the week preceding AIM's visit, 250 Mozambicans had been repatriated at Ressano Garcia: all had come from Massingir and Chicualacuala districts in Gaza, after bandit attacks on frontier villages. About 70 of these people, clutching the possessions they had managed to carry, were sitting outside the immigration post during our visit. They had completed repatriation forms, which they said Portuguese speaking officials at Komatipoort on the South African side of the border had given to them.

From here they go to a makeshift transit camp, where they live in tents provided by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), before they are transferred to the centre for repatriated people in the Maputo suburb of Xipamanine.