

# A visitor <sup>GDN</sup> <sup>6.5.87</sup> from the abyss

One of the few things which have demonstrably worked in Mozambique these past few years is the remarkably smooth transfer of power after the sudden and tragic loss in an air disaster last October of President Samora Machel and many of his key advisers. His successor, Mr Joaquim Chissano, who calls on Mrs Thatcher today, has less "personality" but more intellectual edge than his predecessor, whose charm seems to have conjured unexpected quantities and types of aid out of Downing Street. President Chissano, as interim Prime Minister just before liberation from Portuguese rule in 1975 and foreign minister thereafter, was the only conceivable successor to Mr Machel. The latter's service as architect of Frelimo's displacement of the colonial regime after the 1974 Portuguese revolution and as Mozambique's first independent leader would in any circumstances have been a hard act to follow. In contemporary conditions it must surely be one of the world's least desirable inheritances. Mr Chissano is battling against the most ferocious and intractable elements. If one had wanted to contrive a combination of problems to tax the ingenuity of the most brilliant and experienced of leaders, these would be they.

Mozambique's principal disadvantage is its geographical position as an immediate neighbour of South Africa. From this fact more than any other, whether colonial neglect, ideologically-inspired mismanagement after independence, misplaced faith in the Soviet bloc or drought, derives the daunting combination of problems threatening the country's very existence. It is second only to Angola as a target for South African subversion, despite the fact that Pretoria and Maputo concluded a mutual non-aggression pact (the Nkomati accord) three years ago. The reason is that Mozambique offers obvious transit routes into South Africa for insurgents. Regardless of Mr Machel's efforts to prevent his territory being thus used, Pretoria has never lifted the pressure and has gone on supporting the Mozambique National Resistance or Renamo.

This rebellion was conjured up by the Rhodesians in the late 1970s, in response to Frelimo's hospitality to their guerrilla opponents. Renamo almost faded away on Zimbabwean independence in 1980, only to be revived by Pretoria and some unofficial Portuguese revanchist interests as part of a regional destabilisation policy. Until recently the rebels, who successfully play on genuine grievances against Frelimo, seemed to be having it all their own way. Their military victories, continual disruption of tenuous but vital communications and ability to go anywhere with apparent impunity seemed to threaten Maputo itself. Meanwhile much of the population of a naturally fertile country now faces famine

from the deadly coincidence of civil war and record drought. We see the pictures of acute suffering on our television screens; we have to remember in Mozambique, as in Ethiopia, that the scourge of war abets the scourge of nature. This is, crucially, a man-made disaster. And some of the men are South Africans.

In recent weeks Malawi, where Renamo used to be allowed to roam, has changed sides and sent some troops over the border to help Frelimo, as Tanzania and, above all, Zimbabwe, did rather earlier. Elements of these multinational forces are reported to have captured one of Renamo's main bases this month; and Frelimo is benefiting from the officer-training scheme begun last year as part of Britain's unusually pragmatic programme of aid for an avowedly Marxist regime. Modern infantry weapons have also been supplied, together with increased bilateral and humanitarian help. We have never sympathised with the British Government's reluctance to confront apartheid, but this well-timed, practical and considered assistance to one of its principal external victims goes some way to making good the deficiency. If Mr Chissano asks for more of the same, he should be given it.