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AID ON APPROVAL FOR MAPUTO

There is something disconcerting about an official visit which is as low-key and discreet as last week's visit to London by President Joaquim Chissano of Mozambique. Described by the Foreign Office as merely a normal expression of the "steady improvement in our relations over the past five or six years", it might have passed off entirely unremarked, had reports not circulated (subsequently denied) that Britain might consider sending troops to Mozambique if requested by Maputo.

It transpires that Britain has agreed to provide more military training for the Mozambique army, but in Zimbabwe, as at present, not in Mozambique. Even this apparently minor increase in assistance is, however, quite a change. Five years ago the very suggestion that Britain might assist Mozambique's Marxist regime militarily would have been unthinkable.

The change in the relationship between Britain and Mozambique can be attributed to reassessments both here and in Maputo. In Mozambique the rigid pro-Moscow alignment of 10 years ago has given way to a more practical appraisal of friends and enemies based on the country's own requirements and the exigencies of southern African politics. President Chissano's

accession six months ago appeared to accelerate that change.

In London, the readiness to talk to the new President and offer his country more aid may indicate an opportunity sensed and grasped. It may also denote a more far-sighted, regional, approach to the problems of southern Africa. Either would be praiseworthy. But it is important to distinguish what has changed in Mozambique from what has not.

Mozambique is still a Marxist regime. There are few signs that practical considerations have started to outweigh ideological loyalties, except in so far as numbers of Mozambicans risk starvation and the West is more capable of feeding them than is Moscow. The question is whether Maputo is willing to contribute to the help now promised from London by moderating its collectivist policies, or whether it regards Britain as just another ally in its war against South Africa.

So long as this question and its implications are fully considered, the adjustment of British policy towards Mozambique can bring mutual benefit. If the principal objective of our policy in the region is to bring about majority rule in South Africa with as little upheaval as possible in the area as a whole, then a

positive regional approach is preferable to one which condemns Marxism, condemns white supremacy in South Africa and condemns sanctions, but offers no alternative.

Britain's rejection of the sanctions option — on the unimpeachable grounds that it would harm the economies of the Front Line states more than it would contribute to reform in South Africa — has laid the Government open to charges of hypocrisy. A policy directed towards strengthening and stabilizing the Front Line states, on the other hand, is a prudent preparation for the eventual transfer of power in South Africa. Yet it may be legitimately asked whether foresight and, in some quarters, a guilty conscience about sanctions may not have led to overgenerosity.

Mozambique, a non-Commonwealth, non-democratic state will this year account for some six per cent of Britain's overseas aid budget. It is receiving famine relief, support for its borrowing abroad, funding for the improvement of its railways and port facilities (as a precaution against routes through South Africa being closed), and training for its army. A few conditions about changes in economic practice and moves towards democracy would not come amiss before more help is given.