

MOZAMBIQUE

Machel re-education camps teach a tough lesson

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He was Portuguese, but Mozambican born and bred. At 19 he married. At 23 he was settled with three children, a home, a job and a little money. Life was difficult and uncertain under the Frelimo regime, but he was content.

It was the money that did it, the 5 000 escudos (about R50) he kept at home with the small amount of foreign currency - including American dollars - he had scraped together for emergencies. But it was against the law, a crime against the economy of Mozambique. So they came to arrest him: Frelimo soldiers who dragged him from his home in front of his terrified wife and children. It was the middle of 1976, and the horror that was to last almost a year had begun.

The prison in Beira was his first shock: 68 men packed into a cell 4m by 3m, originally built for four. Food was scarce - half a plate of sadza once a day, occasionally with a small piece of meat. And water was available only for two hours in the morning and two in the afternoon. Sleeping was achieved in shifts because of lack of space, with half the men standing and the other half crouched back-to-back to snatch a few hours of semi-consciousness.

He waited for his trial, but there was none - not even a formal charge. Frelimo took him from his cell and asked him about his crime: did he accept the accusation that he had conspired against the economy by hoarding money and keeping it out of circulation? He did, and was left alone. He had seen what happened to those who argued, when they were thrown - beaten and bruised and bleeding - back into their prison after a session with the soldiers.

So the time passed, slowly. He was cut off completely from the outside world, forbidden contact even with his family. Then came his time to be taken away, to one of the four re-education camps in Gorongosa (two for women and girls, two for men and boys). His head was shaved, his shoes and clothes removed and he was dressed in a loincloth. He was taken to where he would live: a structure of wooden poles with canvas stretched on top, without sides, without floors, without light or heat. He would sleep on the ground, he was told, and there would not be any blankets. Lie close to the others, they said, and you will be warm.

So he joined the 1 500 others for his re-education. The daily programme began at 3.30 am, when they were hustled into queues to collect their daily ration: a small plate of sadza



Re-education camp: first picture smuggled out; (inset) Cara Alegre, Frelimo commander

and a dried fish. That was followed by an hour-long lecture on the history of Frelimo and communist ideology, after which they formed up and were forced to march up to 15 km to their place of work. Then they were given a badza and told to clear the bush - not for crops or vegetable gardens, but to make way for new camps for new prisoners arrested every day. The ground was hard and rough and the sun was fierce. There were no shoes, no hats, and only river water to drink.

Men became weak and emaciated from dehydration and malnutrition, from malaria and bilharzia, from skin cancer and festering untreated wounds. But no one died at the camp. Those too weak to work were taken away in lorries and never came back.

They were allowed perhaps three hours of sleep - four if they were lucky. And so it went on, never varying, never relaxing. Nobody was released. There were no letters, of course. No books. No magazines. Only the local Frelimo newspaper that lauded the illustrious and prosperous state of Mozambique.

It had been almost a year since his arrest. He, too, was pitifully thin and weak; burned dark brown by the sun, hardened and coarsened by the continued exposure to the elements. Then on Saturday May 7 at 6.30 am, he had been at work for two hours already, when he saw a man in Frelimo uniform with a Russian machinegun approach a guard and talk to him. It was nothing unusual. He returned to his patch of bush.

Then he heard the staccato rattle of machinegun fire: the man had killed at least 16 Frelimo guards, catching them unawares and mowing them down unopposed. He told the prisoners to take the weapons from the dead guards and follow him into the bush. More than 100 went.

Over 400 km of hostile country stood be-

tween them and freedom. But they ran, obeying the orders of the man in Frelimo camouflage who had saved them. They walked, they crawled. Some were too weak, and had to be left behind. Those gave their weapons to the survivors, agreeing that if they were caught they would say they had been forced to run but had managed to escape. They might just be believed - if they were unarmed.

Near the Pungwe River they met Frelimo, and in a short battle killed two of them. Across the river two more soldiers were waiting for them, and they went on together. But the pace was exhausting, and more and more fell away

from the group to lie half-dead on the ground.

So the leader of the trio - who said they belonged to FUMO (United Democratic Front of Mozambique) - requisitioned a tractor from a peasant farmer along the way. He posed as a Frelimo, taking a batch of redundant prisoners to be killed in the bush, and the farmer even drove his tractor and trailer for them over a short distance. Then he returned home, and the bedraggled group kept his vehicle until - not far from the Rhodesian border - they once more encountered Frelimo.

Again they went through, this time with the help of hand grenades. And finally they were at the border. Of the 100 that started only 36 were left, and only three of eight whites who had set out with them were among that number. The FUMO soldiers waited while the survivors straggled across the border and then disappeared back into the Mozambican bush.

Throughout his narrative the man had been nervous, almost unsure of his surroundings and of the new clothes that hung on his emaciated frame. His hands were never still throughout the story: emphasising, describing, bearing witness to the past 12 agonising months. His eyes had been those of a frightened animal. He looked more than twice his 23 years.

Now the agony that awaited him was that of uncertainty: would his family make it safely out of Mozambique to join him in Portugal? Would he find work and a place to live in Portugal? Could he start his life again, with nothing but his life - so dearly won - still his own?

But Mozambique and Samora Machel had left at least one legacy to this small, shaking man. Not hatred. It was too soon for that. But knowledge. Knowledge of his own strength and endurance; the knowledge of bestial inhumanity and cruelty so lightly dismissed by the world; the knowledge of the true Mozambique.