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Mozambique's peril

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THE situation in Southern Africa is deteriorating very fast. After years of destabilisation practised by Pretoria both directly and through its surrogate force, the Mozambique National Resistance, and after a severe drought which has brought starvation and economic disruption, Mozambique is barely able to resist the present assault it is receiving.

Sergio Vieira, Mozambique's security minister, has warned that Pretoria may be planning an invasion with the aim of installing a puppet regime. Even if matters do not go that far this time, the military picture is still serious. The rebel forces who have been sheltered by Malawi and recruited, funded and trained by South Africa, are now controlling bridges that cross the Zambesi river, as they arrive from the north. If they cross to the south, they will seriously threaten other economies than Mozambique's, Zimbabwe's for one, and the threat to Maputo will in any case have moved closer.

Zimbabwe has committed itself to wide-ranging military assistance. President Machel recently told a press conference that Mozambique would turn to the Soviet Union for military aid if South Africa directly attacked Mozambique. India's Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi said in Harare that India would consider supplying arms if Frontline States requested such aid and mention was made of an Indian air force cover for the Beira corridor.

But short-term aid is not an answer to a long-term problem. There is irony in the fact that the EEC has given such large financial assistance to the Southern African Development Coordination Conference and yet is now completely failing to speak with one voice and impose effective economic sanctions on South Africa. The bickering in Brussels has made clear to South Africa that it can act with impunity and no consequences will follow. Those innocent civilians that Mrs Thatcher is so anxious to protect from sanctions are presently being killed and mutilated in their hundreds in Mozambique; Western vacillation and intransigence bears a large portion of the blame.

News that British business is poised to leap into the breach opened up by the US Congress sanctions vote adds insult to injury. And British government personnel are aiding them, unrepentant.

Mozambique's need is urgent. Countries who reject platitudes and accept their responsibility to help the frontline withstand South Africa should now come forward and join the fight for quickly-imposed and crippling sanctions against the regime. Those who will not will come to regret it.