

A Talent for Survival

Africa News contributor William Minter returned from his latest tour of Mozambique in July. Below, he offers his impressions of the effects war and famine have had on the resilient nation:

My acquaintance with Mozambique goes back over 20 years, since I first taught at the secondary school for exiled Mozambicans in neighboring Tanzania.

Across the border, the Mozambique Liberation Front (Frelimo) was fighting for independence. Only after more than a decade of war did Portugal's army, exhausted with the conflict, overthrow its own regime and negotiate independence for its African colonies.

At the time, I had returned for a second stint at the Tanzanian school, not realizing what an eventful period it would be. As teachers and students moved into Mozambique just prior to independence – June 25, 1975 – thousands of Portuguese settlers fled, unwilling to live under black rule. Many, as they left, destroyed farm machinery or factories, raided financial institutions and disabled electrical plants and other facilities.

Although there was little left to build upon but their own energies, the people's enthusiasm was palpable. The new Frelimo government opened rural health clinics in areas virtually devoid of medical services and began ambitious literacy programs to combat a 95% illiteracy rate.

Returning to the country this year, 12 years after independence, I picked up a Health Ministry report recording the destruction by Renamo of 484 rural clinics, approximately one third the number built during those years.

Mozambique's economy, which had begun to recover in the late 1970s, was virtually bankrupt, with 1986 exports down to 28% of their 1980 total; 1987 exports are expected to barely cover the \$86 million in interest due on the foreign debt.

Although the Frelimo government is winning praise for its economic strategies from international agencies and western governments, no policies can compensate for the wholesale pillage of the economic infrastructure caused by the war.

On my last trip to Mozambique in 1984, President Samora Machel was

signing a non-aggression pact with South Africa in hopes of stemming the violence.

But far from diminishing, the war has sharply escalated. In mid-1986, thousands of Renamo forces poured across the border from Malawi, overrunning large portions of Mozambique's Zambezi River Valley provinces, razing schools, clinics and sugar estates, and, for the first time, taking district capitals. With Zimbabwean and Tanzanian reinforcements, government forces retook most of this territory early this year, but they found towns in ruins and hundreds of thousands of refugees destitute.

Intelligence reports from Gaza and Inhambane provinces indicate that more than 1,000 new Renamo troops – many recently trained in South Africa – had infiltrated.

At Chokwe, a strategic rice-growing settlement in Gaza province, I spoke with *deslocados* (displaced people) who had fled Renamo attacks on their villages and farms across the Limpopo River. If it was safe, Ernesto Mabunda said wistfully, he would return home to harvest his crops. But even as I spoke to him, the flight from the villages was accelerating. Chokwe officials said 500 *deslocados* had arrived in the town of 10,000 people during June and July alone, and thousands more were living in surrounding villages. By October, Chokwe proper housed 4,000 displaced people.

Having heard dozens of tales of Renamo's activities, I attended a government-sponsored rally in the port city of Beira, called to support Maputo's rejection of any negotiations with the "armed bandits."

According to Renamo representative Luis Serapiao, a Howard University professor who left Mozambique in the mid-1960s, Beira should be a hotbed of support for Renamo, because Frelimo, he says, discriminates against the central provinces. But for two and a half hours, I watched 500,000 Beira residents – a good proportion of the city's adult population – file into the plaza, chanting slogans denouncing the atrocities of the *matsangas* (the local term for Renamo). It was, I was told, the largest rally since independence.

It seemed to me that a hostile crowd could easily have overrun the dignitaries sitting on folding chairs on the speakers' platform – the largest number of troops present were in the marching band! I counted about 50 armed soldiers in the plaza and fewer than 10 sharpshooters on adjoining buildings.

Although the crowd was subdued, the loudest chant expressed support for the president "*Chissano, amigo, o povo esta' contigo!*" ("Chissano, friend, the people are with you!").

Again and again as I travelled I heard variations on one theme about Renamo: "How can these people be for us, when they kill us and destroy what our country needs to develop? If there is war, why don't they fight the army, not the people?"

In 1984, one of Frelimo's top leaders told me that a genuine opposition movement could win much popular support. The party's dogmatic opposition to religion in the early years, its failure to support peasant agriculture – while wasting money on large state farms – and a sluggish and unresponsive bureaucracy inherited from the Portuguese made the country ripe for unrest. But Renamo's terrorism, the Frelimo official said, had persuaded people that if they had any hope at all, it was with the government.

What is most surprising about Mozambique is not the enormous destruction, but the capacity to survive despite it all. Still, one fears what the country may yet have to face.

As I was leaving Maputo, the Rev. Allan Boesak, in his capacity as head of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, was arriving for the Mozambican Presbyterian Church's centennial celebration. In meetings with President Chissano and church leaders, the South African cleric stressed his view that the apartheid regime "is a danger to the whole region." He pledged to continue the struggle together with Mozambique until "all of our people in the whole region can be free."

Boesak's remarks were a pertinent reminder that Mozambique is unlikely to see peace until there are governmental changes in South Africa. In the interim, Mozambique will undoubtedly continue its appeals to the international community to help even the odds. Its capacity for survival will depend, in large part, on the response. ■