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Mozambique: Few Escape Fury of War

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QUELIMANE, Mozambique — Hundreds of people sought refuge from war at a relief camp outside this decaying town. But Mozambique's cruel reality crept up on them there.

A long ribbon of dirt courses from a nearby forest through thick weeds and ends at the settlement, a patchwork of crude reed huts and ragged people. Anti-Government rebels are said to have emerged recently from the forest's dark density, followed the path and struck a match to tenuous hopes.

A visit by foreign reporters to the site, which seemed blanketed by lethargy, revealed a landscape pockmarked by nearly 40 burned huts.

More than 1.5 million Mozambicans, driven by fear and horror, have fled their homes because of a 12-year-old war that pits the South African-supported rebels of the Mozambique National Resistance against this country's Marxist Government. The conflict has created a calamity in which more than 6 million of Mozambique's 14 million people need some form of food assistance from abroad, with 3.2 million of them dependent on free emergency food.

Situation in Flux

Relief workers say that the situation shifts so rapidly that areas that were considered relatively safe a few months ago now lie in ruins. Large chunks of the interior are viewed as ungovernable. Some areas are held by Government troops by day and rebels by night. As a result, many people stream into urban centers as dusk settles and return to their fields at dawn in an often futile attempt to farm. Others, called the "deslocados," or displaced, just keep moving. But so do the rebels.

Scenes in the camp near Quelimane, the capital of Zambezia Province, as well as those in other places in the country's central provinces, come together as a tapestry of despair.

In Inhaminga, in neighboring Sofala

Province, a woman cowered in a tattered sack sat on the sandy ground with her two-year-old son, a child with a distended belly and dull eyes. He had not eaten for seven days before arriving at a relief camp. One or two people usually die immediately after arriving at the center, said an official of Mozambique's sole political party who is based in the area.

"But more die on the road," the official said. "At least we can count them here."

School Buildings Destroyed

Elsewhere in Inhaminga, people dressed only in tree bark sat silently in a row. Down the road, more than 70 war orphans were taught by teachers under a tree. Every school building had been destroyed and only the walls of some houses remained standing.

Huts and people were cramped together at a camp in the town of Nicoadala in Zambezia. The center started with 1,000 people in 1986. Now there were about 4,000.

At the camp just beyond Quelimane, Carmon Jemba recalled the rebel attack that broke the uneasy calm on a patch of land where the air is heavy with heat and a breeze is rarely felt.

"The bandits began to shoot, rat-tat-tat," said Mr. Jemba, referring to the rebels by the name the Government uses for them. A group of people, disheveled and silent, gathered around him. Some begged visiting foreigners for shoes and cigarettes.

'Stole People's Saucepans'

"The bandits burned down these houses," he said. "They stole clothing, they stole people's saucepans. When they steal clothes from the people, they put on the good clothes and leave their old ones."

One of the more than 1,000 people living at the relief camp dumped a sack of filthy, shredded clothing at Mr. Jemba's feet to illustrate his words.

As Mr. Jemba led a group of reporters through the camp, he asked them to walk single file. He pointed to a small

depression in the ground where an anti-personnel mine had been discovered and warned that any who strayed could set off others hidden in the earth.

Denis Fernando, 10 years old, had no such warning.

The child was working in the fields of his father's farm when his hoe struck a mine. The blast smashed the right side of his face.

Waiting for a Convoy

As flies buzzed around the dried blood on his wounds, Denis sat motionless at a Government warehouse in Nicoadala, a broken-down whistle stop about 25 miles north of Quelimane. Along with others, he was waiting for a convoy, the safest way to travel, that would take him home after a stay in a local hospital.

In Sena, a town of crumbling and deserted buildings in Sofala Province, a small crowd of people stood against the backdrop of a burned-out house where about 11 people were massacred. People in the crowd said that the rebels, who held the town for three days recently, herded their victims into the house and threw a hand grenade in after them. The community's nurse was among those killed, and now the medical clinic's janitor dispenses tubes of ointment and eye drops to the sick.

A barefoot man, his pencil-thin legs sticking out from a dirty, oversized shirt, stepped forward and revealed a jagged gash on his back, which he said was caused by being forced by the rebels to carry stolen 100-pound bags of rice. He and others captured by the rebels were given nothing to eat or drink. When the captives tried to scoop up rain water from hollows in the ground, the man said, the rebels hit them and told them to keep moving.

Sena is virtually a garrison town these days, patrolled by heavily armed soldiers dressed in camouflage fatigues. But their presence offers little confidence to people here. They are rebuilding houses laid waste by the war. But they are building them smaller this time, in case the rebels come again.