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Inhaminga: a ghost town with people

by Paul Fauvet

When Neil Kinnock, leader of the British Labour Party, visited the town of Inhaminga, in the central Mozambican province of Sofala in mid-July, all the available vehicles were mobilised in his honour.

There were two of them. One was an extraordinarily battered open landrover where those travelling in the back had to beware of gaping holes in the floor. It always needed a push from several Mozambican soldiers to get it started.

Kinnock himself travelled on the back of a rusting old ford lorry that had once belonged to Mozambique Railways. This truck was missing its windscreen and one of its doors, and thick, evil-smelling fumes poured out of its exhaust.

When she saw this museum piece, one member of Kinnock's delegation immediately suggested we walk from the airstrip into town.

In fact, the labour leader was recieving a considerable honour in this war-torn part of the country, where shortages of everything are a way of life. The last time I visited Inhaminga, in February, we did have to walk, for three kilometres under a scorching sun, into the town. Then there was not a drop of fuel in Inhaminga (or possibly the local authorities decided it was not worth wasting precious petrol on a bunch of visiting journalists).

The tide of war has swept back and forth across Inhaminga over the past six years. Between 1982 and 1986 South Africa's MNR bandits occupied the town briefly on five occasions. As a result, Inhaminga is largely in ruins, and most of the original population has either fled southwards to the Beira corridor, or has been abducted by the MNR, to serve the bandits as forced labour.

Since mid-1986, the Mozambican armed forces (FPLM) have established an effective defence system which the MNR have not been able to penetrate. However, they have continued to launch substantial attacks against the town, the most recent of which were on 25 December and 1 January. Perhaps on these holidays, they assumed that the army would be less vigilant: but in fact both these attacks were driven back.

Since then there have been a series of what local officers describe as "minor attacks", consisting of up to half an hour of exchange of fire. The last such occasion was on 9 July.

Any cultivation must take place very close to the town, so that the chances of Inhaminga producing sufficient food for itself are remote. The FPLM can guarantee security for a radius of eight kilometres around the town, but beyond that, peasant farmers can only cultivate at their own risk.

The economy of the town once rested on the railway workshops servicing trains that travelled from Beira to Malawi, and on the rich timber resources of the forests of Cheringoma, the district of which Inhaminga is the capital. But the trains stopped running in 1984, and the MNR has wrecked most of the sawmills.

The Beira-Malawi railway has been repeatedly sabotaged, and the coup de grace was the destruction in 1986 of two spans of the massive bridge over the Zambezi river. At Inhaminga, dozens of wagons rust in the sidings. In the workshops there are eleven wrecked locomotives, one of them steam and the rest diesel. The machinery is silent, but to its credit the railway company has coated it with grease to prevent it from rusting. In the long term, Mozambique certainly intends to revive this railway.

But currently, there is pretty well no production of anything in Inhaminga. The 9,000 people living here are dependent on food aid for survival. Mozambique's relief body, the Disasters' Control Office (DPCCN), and the International Red Cross, regularly fly food into the town's grass airstrip. But there are several other similarly isolated towns in Sofala to be fed: relief workers in Beira have to juggle the flying schedules so that enough food can be sent to everyone in need in the province.

If three days pass without a relief plane appearing, then the authorities in Inhaminga begin to worry: for a DC-3 can only carry three tonnes of food. This makes it extremely difficult to build up any significant level of stocks.

The food is largely maize, beans and cooking oil, with some milk and sugar, mainly for children. During a briefing given by local officials, one of the British journalists accompanying Kinnock asked

if any meat was available. Police commander and interim district administrator Guilherme Chauque began to laugh: "Well, occasionally we might go and hunt an antelope", he said.

Starvation is only evident in the town amongst the most recent arrivals, fleeing from MNR-infested areas in the Cheringoma countryside. Some of the children whom we saw entering the town that Sunday, pathetic bundles of skin and bones, looked as if they would not survive.

A group of 20 people had just arrived after walking for three days, fleeing from an MNR controlled area. They were exhausted, the children clearly suffering from severe malnutrition, the adults showed signs of skin diseases such as scabies, and some bearing ugly open sores.

But it was their clothes that attracted most attention. Several wore strips of strong green material that they described unhesitatingly with the english word "parachute". These were the remnants of South African parachutes, used to drop supplies to MNR gangs in central Mozambique. Some of these displaced people had been used as slave labour by the MNR to carry the crates of ammunition dropped by parachute, or landed by sea along the Cheringoma coast.

They told us that the bandits had stripped them of all their clothes, and had then provided them with the parachute material, but in exchange for food. Others among the MNR's captive population fashioned rough clothes out of flattened tree bark.

In the MNR-held zone the captives built huts and planted crops, but the MNR would regularly come round, or send their collaborators, a kind of bandit police force referred to as "majibas", to demand food. "If we did not give them what they wanted, we would be beaten", recalled one of them.

When people such as these arrive at Inhaminga from the bush, they are initially housed in a reception centre, where they are given their first meals. After medical personnel have inspected them, they are housed in one of the eight neighbourhoods in which Inhaminga is divided, with relatives if possible.

The town has a feeding centre for malnourished children, providing a protein-rich diet, but the nurse in charge admits that the centre cannot save everyone who comes there.

The feeding centre used to be a primary school, but during the MNR occupations of Inhaminga, like most of thr other buildings, it was vandalised. Today it is a bare shell. the mothers with their sick children sleep on the floor. The luckier ones have straw mats. The only furniture in sight are two metal beds. There are no mattresses, let alone sheets or blankets.

Health services have been re-established in Inhaminga. The health post can deal with vaccinations, minor injuries, and distributes oral rehydration salts for diarrhoeal diseases. It has a tiny maternity ward, but the two metal beds there have no mattresses or blankets. People who are seriously ill must be evacuated to Beira if they are to survive.

So Inhaminga fights for life, and local military officers seem cheerful about the situation (which is indeed much better than in 1986). Nonetheless, the impression a visitor receives is, in the words of one of the visiting Britons, of "a ghost town with people".

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