

The destruction of Manjacaze

by Basilio Langa

The town of Manjacaze, in the southern Mozambican province of Gaza has suffered enormous destruction as a result of the latest incursions of South Africa's MNR bandits, on 14 February.

Though not as bloody as the MNR attack of 10 August 1987, when over 90 people were massacred, this latest raid on Manjacaze has left the town in a desolate condition, with shops, warehouses and other buildings in ruins, or reduced to ashes.

Eight people are known to have died in the attack, and a further 23 were wounded. The bandits themselves lost ten of their number in clashes with the local defence forces.

The bandits broke into the local bank and burnt all the documentation, they destroyed 18 homes, and, perhaps most seriously, they tried to wipe out the Manjacaze business community - principally shopkeepers who in small towns play a key role in agricultural marketing, buying peasant surpluses, and selling the manufactured goods the peasants need.

"I'm ruined. All I have left is two pairs of trousers", said businessman Mehboob Khan to AIM reporters visiting the town shortly after the attack. "My sons and my wife also have nothing. I have no money left in the bank".

The shop that Mr Khan lost was the second of his properties to be burnt down by the MNR. Since 1981 he has been the target of seven bandit attacks.

In all, 11 Manjacaze shops were burnt down on 14 February. For their owners, the situation is particularly bad because they had made heavy investments in consumer goods to be used in this year's cashew marketing campaign. In order to persuade peasants to collect and market cashew nuts (one of Mozambique's principal exports), the local shops must have goods that they can buy.

So the Manjacaze shops and warehouses were full of goods - which the bandits either stole, or set on fire.

Mr Khan estimates that the goods in his shop were worth 4.25 million meticais (about 64,000 US dollars). His personal belongings,

also destroyed, were worth another six million meticaais.

Indecision seems to be the current state of mind of the Manjacaze businessmen. "I'm thinking about agriculture, but I still don't really know what I'm going to do", said Mr Khan. "My cousin told me he's going to start selling things from his veranda. Perhaps I'll do the same".

He thinks that, under the circumstances, the government should allow any kind of establishment - including warehouses, and even back yards - to be used for trading purposes.

Rofina Pedro Langa, another businessman whose shop is now a heap of ashes, told AIM that he had taken out a loan of a million meticaais from the bank, shortly before the bandit raid.

"Now I'm thinking of writing a letter to the bank, informing them of the situation, asking for a longer repayment period, and also requesting another loan", he said. "It's the only way I can see of getting back on my feet".

A spokesman for the Bank of Mozambique in the provincial capital, Xai-Xai, told AIM that the bank does not yet have enough information about the losses suffered by its clients to take a decision on credit. He said that the bank would study the matter case by case.

The businessmen do not necessarily own the buildings in which their shops were situated. Instead they rent space from the state housing authority, APIE. Indeed, seven of the shops burnt down on 14 February were in buildings belonging to APIE. Some of the businessmen are now suggesting that APIE sell them the ruins, and they will try to rebuild the shops.

However, the response from the district director of APIE is that the law only allows APIE to sell shops that are located in rural zones. He suggested that the shopkeepers could rebuild the shops using their own finance, which would then be set off against the rent they pay.

APIE itself did not have the resources to rebuild the destroyed shops, he said.

The first reports of the raid that reached Maputo said that the bandits had destroyed the cashew processing factory in Manjacaze. This turned out to be inaccurate.

However, the raiders did burn 339,286 kilos of cashew nuts, and 24,000 boxes of packaging material. Equipment in the factory

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warehouse was sabotaged, and the walls and roof were damaged by fire

The factory itself does not process cashews at the moment, due to the overall decline in cashew marketing. The nuts that were destroyed were to have been transported to another factory in Xai-Xai, which is part of the state-owned National Cashew Company. The Manjacaze factory has obsolete equipment, while the Xai-Xai one is modern.

Nonetheless the Manjacaze factory has the installed capacity to process 5,000 tonnes of cashew per year and provide 783 jobs. The last time it processed cashews was in 1981, when it dealt with almost 4,000 tonnes.

The director of the Manjacaze factory, Moises Saute, said that cashew production this season was particularly poor, due to drought in the region. So far only 437,000 kilos had been marketed in Manjacaze district - and over 75 per cent of that has now been destroyed by the MNR.

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