

Stronger South American Ties With Africa Sought by Center in Brazil

By Carole Collins

THE Center for Afro-Asian Studies at Candido Mendes University here started out three decades ago as a think tank for Brazil's foreign ministry. It later became a militant advocate for African liberation movements and third-world non-alignment. Now it is emerging as a pioneer in higher-education cooperation among nations in the Southern Hemisphere.

Its newest program, supported by the Ford Foundation, is aimed at strengthening academic links between South America and Africa.

The project, designed to supplant traditional relationships that sent Portuguese-speaking Africans to Lisbon for higher education, reflects Brazil's growing sense of itself as the cultural and economic leader of the Lusophone world.

LOOKING TO FORMER COLONIES

The first beneficiaries of the program are students from Mozambique, which, like Brazil, is a former Portuguese colony. No Mozambican educational institution offers a college-level, social-science curriculum. The students in the four-year program here are being educated so that they can help train a future generation of social-science teachers and researchers in their war-torn, and education-starved, southern African nation.

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ficial of the center for 20 years and coordinator of its Africa programs, says success with the pilot project for Mozambicans could lead to programs for other Portuguese-speaking Africans. He says the center could soon be helping students from Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, and São Tomé and Príncipe, as well as Angola, which is struggling to emerge from 15 years

of civil war that has destroyed much of its educational infrastructure.

To its sponsors, the center offers a less costly and more culturally appropriate alternative to programs that bring students from the developing world to North America or Western Europe.

Officials of the center also say that the academic concerns of a

newly industrialized and still-developing country like Brazil are very relevant to students from poor nations that are seeking their own path to economic development.

Mozambique, a nation of 15 million people, has only one university, two other postsecondary institutions, and five secondary schools that offer college-preparatory courses. Many of the country's schools have been destroyed by a violent rebel group, the Mozambique National Resistance, known as RENAMO, which targeted educational and social-service institutions.

The country's President, Joaquim Chissano, has called the modest program in Brazil to train a total of 35 educators "very important" to his country. He said he hoped that Mozambique's educational ties with Brazil would grow.

SHUT DOWN BY THE JUNTA

The Center for Afro-Asian Studies was established in 1961 as a research institute in the office of the Brazilian President. It reflected Brazil's strong interest in newly independent African countries then emerging from colonial rule. Despite its official name, the center's main focus has always been Africa.

In its early years, the center conducted policy studies, offered foreign-service training, cultivated key contacts among African heads of state, and advised the Brazilian government on cultural accords, according to Mr. Nunes.

Shut down after a military junta seized power in Brazil in 1965, the center was resurrected in 1973 at Rio's Candido Mendes University as "a typical, militant, third-world center," says Mr. Nunes. The center's anti-colonial stand, he explains, allowed it "to mediate between the Brazilian government and the new emerging African states," especially after Angola and Mozambique became independent in 1975.

Over the past decade, the center's focus shifted from overt advocacy in Africa's behalf to trying to strengthen academic research and library facilities on the continent.

In the process it developed an Afro-Brazilian-studies program, the popularity of which reflects growing demand here for education and research on the links between millions of Brazilians and their African ancestors, who were brought to the New World as slaves.

CENTER'S NEW ROLE

Although many Brazilian universities now offer courses on Africa, the center is one of the country's three most important African-studies institutes. The others are at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro and the University of São Paulo.

The Mozambique Project, run jointly with the Philosophy and Social Science Institute at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, represents a new role for the center: providing logistical support to foreign students. In the past, many African students have fared poorly in Brazil due to limited or irregularly paid financial support and a lack of orientation to life in a foreign country, says Marcello Bittencourt Pinto, a graduate student who works as an administrative assistant in the Mozambique program.

Students are selected competitively through written essays and personal interviews at participating schools, says Colin Darch, a British scholar who served as the project's founding director and is now chief librarian at South Africa's University of the Western Cape. In the 1980's, he was director of the

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Center for African Studies at Mozambique's Eduardo Mondlane University, the only one in the country. Last year's student interviews took Mr. Darch to some of Mozambique's most devastated areas.

After two years of basic general studies, the students specialize in a social-science discipline of their choice for the remainder of the four-year program.

To make the curriculum more relevant to Mozambique, all students return to their homeland for summer field studies. Officials of the program hope such visits will reduce the likelihood that the students will settle permanently in Brazil, exacerbating Africa's brain drain.

Mr. Pinto says that he and other members of the center staff provide students with a good deal of informal counseling and academic support. "The teachers here usually assume that the students have more knowledge" than they could actually obtain in Mozambique, he says. "But many of them haven't read the classics."

Mr. Pinto says that staff members at the center already have seen the difference the program is making in the Mozambican students. "They have more self-confidence in their speaking," he says, "and in their ideas."