

Gloomy return

Mozambiquans, forced to leave East Germany, find only poverty back home

By Special Correspondent

MAPUTO: A recent demonstration here signalled the bitter return of thousands of migrants who had been working in East Germany in one of the sadder sidelights to the union of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR).

As the GDR disappeared, most of an estimated 85 000 foreign workers had little choice but to pack their bags at short notice and return home without the savings that they had hoped to make for their families, and without the prospect of a job.

Sixteen thousand out of the 85 000 returnees are Mozambiquans. So far 4 000 have returned and by March this year the number is expected to reach 11 000.

Weak economy

Now the Mozambican government faces a drastic drop in hard currency earnings as well as the problem of re-integrating the returnees into the country's weak economy, destroyed by the 5-year old war between President Joaquim Chissano's government and the remnants of the Mozambique National Resistance (Renamo).

It is estimated that 60 percent of the country's 15 million people live in absolute poverty. Jobs, housing and educational opportunities are crisis areas in Mozambique, one of the poorest nations in the world with an average annual per capita income of only US \$150.

Many of the newly returned 4 000 expressed their frustrations by taking part in a demonstration in front of the Ministry of Labour. Slogans had been painted on walls demanding jobs and the money flowing to the migrant workers. Riot police were called out, but there were no serious confrontations.

Following these demonstrations, the Ministry of Labour has cleared a substantial number of debts owed to the returnees.

Now the government has to worry about its own outstanding debt to Germany of more than US \$350 million,



POVERTY-STRICKEN MOZAMBIQUANS:

The influx of 16 000 of their countrymen and women from East Germany is sure to make matters worse. Pic: AIM

which was being partly serviced by the migrant workers. Under the migrant labour agreement, Mozambiquans were entitled to the same pay, benefits and housing as their hosts would receive in the same job - an average of more than three times what their fellow migrants earn on South Africa's gold mines where the work is tougher and more dangerous.

The workers received 40 percent of their pay in the GDR. Sixty percent was

remitted through the Mozambique government and paid out to workers at the end of their contract in the local currency, Metical. The deferred payment structure netted Mozambique substantial hard currency interest earnings.

The GDR government also remitted almost all of workers' social security payments to the Mozambican treasury, worth US \$23 million by August 1988.

At its height in 1989 the migrant labour programme included 18 000

workers and raised more than US \$76 million for the Mozambique government.

Most Mozambiquans have such limited possibilities at home, that when given a chance to work in an industrialised nation, they will plan their income carefully so that when the time comes to return they have savings to carve out a sustainable future.

Ana Chelene (24) had completed five years of her seven-year contracts in the GDR working in a clothes factory. But

she was forced to return last September after just one month's notice.

'I was shocked because it was not my plan,' she says, 'I thought I had another two years to organise my life - my future. But I only had a month to prepare. Life is difficult here. I can't just sit here with my arms crossed. I also have my mother to support.'

Like many Mozambiquans she could not afford to stay on in the GDR even if she had wanted to. Those who stay in Germany lose their right to a once-off lump sum payment of 3 000 Marks (about US \$1 200), plus 70 percent of the worker's former net wage for three months and a paid air ticket home.

Foreigners

But life in the GDR also entailed problems for the foreigners. Most lived in especially reserved hotels or complexes. Ana, for example, lived in a large hotel where each community of foreigners was given a separate floor.

Many were victims of racial abuse when they attempted to mix with the locals at social gatherings. The tensions heightened when locals' jobs were under threat as West German companies took over East German industries.

But Ana says she did not experience much racial prejudice.

'I saw the Germans demonstrating on the television against our presence in the country, but in my firm the Germans said they did not support the protestors. But of course I don't know what they said behind our backs.'

Orlando Guibalo (22) had a different experience.

'Some German men used to tell us we were 'dirtying their land', and that we shouldn't take away their women. These incidents would occur mainly at the discos. They would provoke us and then there would be fights. Some of us got badly beaten up.'

But despite that, Guibalo, who was in the GDR for just over two years, was reluctant to return. His monthly salary of 900 Marks was a vital source of income for his mother, who works as a seamstress and with whom Guibalo now lives.

'I would have liked to have stayed longer, not because it was so great, but because my country has so many problems. There at least I could work and earn money.' -AIA