

# Returnees from ex-GDR riot

For two consecutive days in mid-January hundreds of Mozambican migrant workers, who have returned from the former German Democratic Republic, demonstrated outside the Labour Ministry in Maputo demanding money they believed was owing to them. The protest turned nasty, and led to a bout of rioting and destruction on the second day.

The protest began at about 09.00 on 14 January, as hundreds of returnees blocked the main street in front of the Ministry, and erected barricades. Police intervened unsuccessfully, firing warning shots, but failing to disperse the crowd, even when they lashed out at them with their batons.

The demonstration had been sparked off by rumours that the German government had sent large sums of money (the figure of 360 million marks - about US\$ 228 million - was mentioned) to Mozambique to compensate the former migrants for the loss of their jobs. The returnees were suspicious that this money could have been embezzled by the Labour Ministry, and demanded that it be distributed to them.

## Labour Ministry denies rumours

That evening the Ministry issued a statement denying the existence of any such money, and classifying the rumours as "totally groundless and absurd".

It said that "the attribution of funds of this nature by the German or any other government would be done publicly for the knowledge of everyone, both inside Mozambique and internationally, and never in a clandestine or secret manner".

The ministry pointed out that until now "the promises of funds to support the social and economic reintegration of returnees from the ex-GDR have not materialised". It therefore made no sense to accuse the ministry "of the mismanagement of funds which do not exist".

It added that the German and Mozambican governments were studying possible projects that could provide employment for the returned migrants, and inquiries had therefore been made to determine how many returnees there were in each province, and what their professional qualifications were.

The German embassy confirmed that no money had been sent to support the returnees.

Despite this, the returnees were not convinced and returned to the Labour Ministry on 15 January. But there were now fewer of them, and the police managed to drive them away from the building.

They attempted to regroup in a public garden, but were again dispersed. Battles between the returnees and the police ensued in nearby streets.

Protestors stoned one police land-rover, smashing its windscreen.

They also turned against targets that had nothing to do with the dispute. They wrecked three civilian vehicles, and broke windows in two shops. One shop worker was injured, and had to be taken to hospital for stitches in her arm.

Police arrested 18 of the returnees. But they also lashed out indiscriminately against passers-by, and attacked a photographer, Naita Ussene, who works on the weekly magazine *Tempo*.

## Police attack photographer

Despite the protection offered to journalists under Mozambique's law on press freedom, police assaulted Mr Ussene, threw him to the ground and damaged the two cameras he was carrying.

*Tempo* and the journalists' union, the ONJ both protested, and two days later Mr Ussene and ONJ General Secretary Hilario Matusse met with the interim Interior minister, Edmundo Alberto, who apologised for the police behaviour and promised an investigation to establish which police officer had committed the assault.

Returnees also turned to violence in Beira on 15 January. They attacked the Sofala Provincial Labour Directorate, smashing its windows. They broke into the building, where they caused further damage, including the destruction of documents.

The demonstrators stoned passing cars, apparently at random. Nearby shops hurriedly closed their doors for fear that they too would come under attack.

It later emerged that the German government, far from making a generous offer of compensation for the virtual expulsion of Mozambican migrants, has rejected a request from Mozambique for US\$ 30 million to create jobs for the returnees.

Fion de Vletter, a consultant in the Employment Promotion Office of the Labour Ministry, told the Maputo daily *Noticias* that in February 1991 the Ministry had carried out a study on the finance that would be needed to create jobs for former migrant workers.

It concluded that US\$ 2,000 would be needed to create each job. Since there had been some 16,000 Mozambicans working in the ex-GDR, this meant that a sum of over US\$ 30 million would be required.

"We made this proposal and we sent it to Germany", said Mr de Vletter. "The German government rejected the proposal and said it would send delegations to study the problem of the returnees and draw conclusions as to how much was needed to support them".