

Workers jobless in GDR

New African - 5 FEB 1992

By Ruth Ansa Aylsi

MAPUTO — Mozambican ex-migrant workers in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) heralded the new year with militant demonstrations here to highlight their plight since German unification.

Some 15,000 Mozambicans were working in the GDR two years ago before most of their contracts were abruptly ended when the two Germanys reunited.

The anger and humiliation caused by joblessness boiled over two weeks ago (January 14) into violent scenes as former migrant workers took to the streets in the centre of the Mozambican capital demanding money. Some were claiming an amount as high as US\$228 million (R634 million) had been sent by the German government to the Mozambican authorities to compensate them for the loss of their jobs.

More than 1,000 demonstrators blocked the road outside the labour ministry with barricades. 'It was very frightening,' said a ministry employee. 'The demonstrators were shouting all at once.'

'Then I saw them harassing motorists, bumping their cars up and down as if they were trying to overturn them.'

The police managed to clear the road in front of the ministry,

but the disturbance spilled over into nearby streets.

Police reacted to the violence shooting into the air and hitting out indiscriminately. A photographer from the magazine *Tempo* was allegedly knocked down by a police officer who smashed his two cameras. By the afternoon of January 15, at least 16 protesters had been arrested.

'I have never seen violence on that scale in Maputo,' commented a United Nations official.

Similar demonstrations have taken place in Mozambique's two other major cities, Beira and Nampula.

It is not the first time the ex-migrant workers have vented their frustrations and it is unlikely to be the last because their demands for compensation are unlikely to be met. Both the Mozambican labour ministry and the German embassy say no compensation money exists.

The money rumour was apparently sparked off by a survey being carried out by the ministry to determine how many returnees there were in each province and what their qualifications and skills were. According to some returnees, they were given the impression by officials conducting the survey that the forms being filled

in entitled them to compensation.

However, the German government does plan to give four million marks (about R6 million) for small-scale companies, but the beneficiaries will not only be returnees. Only about 350 people a year will benefit, says Fion de Vletter, a labour ministry consultant.

Many of the migrant workers were in the middle of five-year contracts and dreaming of earning enough money to set themselves and their families up for life when they were forced to return to Mozambique earlier than they had planned.

There has been no cushion to relieve the blow. They came back to one of the poorest countries in the world where more than 60 percent of the people are living in absolute poverty.