

Portugal's indifference angers refugees

More than 150 000 Portuguese refugees from war-torn Angola are waiting and complaining in transit camps in Portugal. They want the Government to take an interest in their plight, but so far they are taking a poor second place to the revolution and anger is rising.

Some of the refugees are people of former influence who have managed to get some of their belongings back to the mainland. But the majority are the small business people for whom colonial life offered a higher standard of living and who have salvaged nothing from Portugal's rapid decolonisation.

Their only refuge in the mother country often turns out to be nothing more than an airport bench or chair. And they soon learn that the Angolan money they acquired before leaving (sometimes from selling nearly new cars for as little as the equivalent of R400) will buy nothing in Lisbon.

Yet 150 000 is only half the total number of Portuguese expected to quit Angola before it is scheduled to become independent on November 11. On arrival in Portugal the refugees are looked after by the Aid Institute for Returning Nationals. They are given medical examinations and taken to transit camps to sit and wait – either until they find jobs or until relatives come to claim them. But in many cases there are neither relatives nor jobs waiting.

There are 10 camps, some almost luxurious, like the former holiday village of Costa

Caparica. Others, such as Toehrs and Santarem, erected on an old fairgrounds site, are barely adequate. Each camp holds between 700 and 1 200 people. In principle, the refugees' stay in the camps should not be more than a few days. In practice, many of them have already been in the camps for several months.

Jobs in revolutionary Portugal are difficult to find and recent big pay rises forced on industry by the various revolutionary governments have made the situation much worse. Slogans like: "We always said Angola was Portugal – that was wrong"; and "The whites were ignored in independence talks", and "At Alvor it was guaranteed that our property and our lives would be safeguarded – lies", have been plastered on posters in the centre of Lisbon.

One expatriate said: "If we remain quiet we won't be a talking point". Another said: "No one listens to us. The newspapers pay more attention to Spaniards condemned to death than to the thousands of Portuguese condemned to a slow death in Angola, Mozambique and Portuguese Timor."

The problem of the refugees, not only those from Angola, but from all of the former Portuguese colonies now in the process of rapid decolonisation, is an insoluble one for the central Government. They present a festering sore on a nation whose body politik is already covered with scabs.