

RICHES ACROSS THE SEA

Portugal is looking to her former colonies, as a market rather than a supplier.

Sian Griffiths reports



Edite was six when her mixed-race family fled the civil war in Angola for Portugal. She was 13 when she started work as a maid – one of the hundreds who make up Portugal's shocking child labour statistics.

Now she is 21 and working in London as an au pair for an English family with strong Portuguese connections.

Fifteen years after Angola gained independence, the "African Question" is once again on the lips, not only of the 700,000 refugees who escaped the carnage, but of thousands who see opportunity in the mineral-rich former colonies of Angola and Mozambique.

For, with the imminent possible ending of the civil wars which have wracked both countries since the mid-1970s, their natural wealth is once more a subject for discussion.

Daniel Reiss, a Portuguese journalist says: "The Portuguese have always had a tendency to work abroad. They have also always had a tendency to look towards the sea, rather than inland towards Europe. Portuguese poetry is all about exile, distance, the sea. These days there are people who think Portugal's economic future is in Europe, the EEC. But there are many more who know it lies in Africa, in our former colonies."

It might seem paradoxical that countries treated badly by a colonial power should turn, after independence is granted and the going gets tough, to that same source for guidance and advice. Yet, in Angola, at least, Portugal has played a role in contributing to the peace process.

Portugal is now acting as a mediator in negotiations between the Marxist MPLA government (once underpinned by both Cuba and the USSR) and the South African backed UNITA rebels. Talks are being held in Lisbon in the presence of Portuguese Secretary of State Durgó Barroso and optimism is now growing that both sides will agree to a general election in 1991.

In Mozambique the ruling socialist FRELIMO party has recently put in place a constitution which permits multi-party politics and a mixed economy. Negotiations with the rebel RENAMO groupings are now pointing to a real prospect of an end to the deadly civil war which has caused thousands of deaths, not only from fighting but also from hunger.

In both former colonies observers say that one trigger has been the end of the Cold War and the subsequent withdrawal of Soviet and Cuban aid. As in Eastern Europe the socialist governments of Angola, Mozambique, Cabo-Verde, Guinea-Bissau and São-tomé e Príncipe are changing. For reasons of internal development a process is taking place which is leading away from socialism.

But Professor Alexandre Pinheiro-Tores, chair of Portuguese and Brazilian Studies at the University of Wales College of Cardiff, says that the fact that Portugal has played a part in the changeover is not so extraordinary. For a start, Portugal now is very different from the colonial power which ruled the African colonies. Indeed it was the Portuguese Revolution of 1974, bringing to an end 50 years of dictatorship in Portugal, which precipitated the release of the former colonies.

"Portuguese is the principal language in both Angola and Mozambique. Their leaders were educated in Portuguese universities. Now they are saying they want the Portuguese back to relaunch their economies. The real paradox is that they want the poorest country in the EEC to help them. They



A Renamo rebel soldier: peace is now a real prospect

know we do not really have the capital to invest, nevertheless, somehow, we are the only people they are willing to deal with. They seem to think that Portugal is the real platform for them to get help from the EEC, a sort of launching pad to develop their economies."

However misguided this conviction – as Professor Pinheiro-Tores adds, Europe has enough to do to sort out the problems arising from the collapse of the Iron Curtain – Portugal has its own reasons for wanting to participate.

For years Portuguese foreign ministers have talked about the "moral responsibility" EEC states have in helping African countries rebuild their economies – given the historic role Europe played in colonising the continent.

Another motive may be the mineral wealth of both countries. Professor Pinheiro-Tores says: "Angola has diamonds, oil, minerals. You name it, Angola has it. It is a very very rich country. For Portugal it is absolutely fundamental that we have some kind of economic role in the big spaces of Africa. Put together Angola and Mozambique are bigger than Western Europe."

At present at least four million Portuguese work abroad. Cynics joke that the second largest city in Portugal is Paris, for with a Portuguese population estimated at around a million, it easily outstrips Oporto.

"I think that most Portuguese living and working abroad say that if one day these African spaces are again opened to us they would go there. They think: 'Here in France, Germany, South Africa, we are treated like dirt – there we would be treated like lords,'" says Professor Pinheiro-Tores.

He recalls the wave of immigrants in 1975/76 who fled Angola for Portugal. "There was a lot of resentment on both sides. We called those returning *retornados*, not a nice name, because they left clutching everything they could – cars, money, bits of furniture."

"On their side they were angry at the government. Why did it give independence to the colonies without first solving the economic problems of those who would be displaced?"

The 700,000 settlers returning to Portugal (many white Portuguese in origin) were housed at the government's expense, in hotels and guest-

houses. But the resident population feared competition for jobs. "The *retornados* would pass in their cars. We could see by the registration numbers that they were not from Portugal. If they were from Portugal there was an A prefixing the number plate, an M for Mozambique."

But despite frustration on both sides, according to the professor, racist incidents were rare. "After five or six years they found jobs, started snack-bars, restaurants, businesses, they inter-married. The situation resolved itself."

Edite says it is now, as unemployment again threatens to rise with the recession, that racism is starting to rear its ugly head.

Now, with the opening up again of possibilities in Africa, the question of the *retornados* is again surfacing. "You see they are still waiting for the Angolan/Mozambican governments to compensate them for their lost houses, factories, farms. The first thing those governments did when they got independence was nationalise all things Portuguese. So they think that the Portuguese president or prime minister may be able to discuss terms of compensation when the civil war is come to an end."

There are powerful pressures urging Portugal towards Africa. The country's future has been bound up with the continent for so long a complete break would be almost unthinkable. But equally, a strengthening of the ties now seems as likely as closer bonds with Europe.

The first candidate to stand against the Portuguese dictator Salazar was a former minister of the colonies. Portugal has been in Africa since the 15th century.

Daniel Reiss says: "If the Portuguese economy is going to take off in the 1990s the connection has to be Africa. From Europe we can buy goods and services. But to sell it has to be Africa."

And so for next year's general election in Portugal all the political parties know that the African card is of great importance.

"If there is a general election in Angola next year and if UNITA wins the Social Democrats will benefit in Portugal, if the MPLA wins, it will be good for the Socialists," predicts Daniel Reiss.