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Lowveld can keep farm Mozambiquans by William Saunderson-Meyer

The Department of Cooperation and Development has backed down from plans to repatriate 40.000 Mozambiquans working in South Africa.

Although the plan is scheduled for discussion between Minister Piet Koornhof and representatives of agriculture only this month official assurances have been given to farmers in the Transvaal lowveld that the department will not go ahead.

The repatriation plan, announced last week, is to be dropped because it would cripple lowveld farmers and lead to the closure of farms on the vulnerable eastern border with Mozambique.

The plans were mooted because of the security threat of thousands of Mozambiquans streaming into South Africa each year in the search of work. It is estimated that in the Komatipoort area alone there are 12.000 Mozambiquans with work permits and 400 there illegally.

Figures given by the Government in Parliament last year showed there were only 5925 Mozambiquans working on South African farms.

The chairman of the Lebombo Farmers Association, Jan Lourens, estimated at least 30.000 Mozambiquans were working legally in the lowveld.

"This is one of the most fertile areas in the country. It could support four times the number of farmers that are here now, but to do that some efficient system of recruiting Mozambiquan labour legally will have to be worked out by the government," he said.

"We realise there are security dangers in employing Mozambiquans. They could be used as a front for subversion, but local labour is almost unobtainable and the Mozambiquans are excellent and willing workers.

"Our attitude is that there are, in the long run, much greater security dangers to having the farms close because of lack of labour.

"Four times the number of farmers means four times that number of labourers. Local blacks are attracted most to the urban areas and it will only be from Mozambique that we will be able to get labour.

"Even black entrepreneurs in KaNgwane have applied to the commissioner for 'no objection' permits to recruit Mozambiquans because of labour shortage."

In the meantime the midnight migration of Mozambiquans across the Lebombo mountains continues. Each month the police arrest about a thousand in the bush and on the farms of the eastern Transvaal. After a swift trial, they are sentenced to three months' jail for illegal entry and another three months for working here illegally.

A new border patrol unit has been set up to deal with the inflow, but the police admit only some who cross are caught. After serving their sentences they queue at the Komati border post to be repatriated.

Driven by lack of work and food shortages, they often try again to cross.

Farmer Tommy Thompson said he felt sorry for the would-be workers but he dared not employ any. "The police raid regularly so we just have to send them

on their way, deeper inland. I know I am supposed to report them to the police, but it is hard to do that to a man who is just looking for work to fill an empty stomach."

But at reaping time, when there is no local labour, the temptation to hire the illegals is great. Some employ the illegals because they are willing to accept far less than the minimum contract wage of R65 and food. It also cuts the expense of legal recruiting between R30 and R45 a person. It often happens that a farmer will recruit 30 labourers and by the end of the month half will have left.

A legally employed worker, Manuel Cervesa, said he had been working for the same employer for 26 years and was still earning the minimum contract wage of R65. "It is not much," he said. "But at least I have food and can send some money to my family in Mozambique. I would never go back to Mozambique to live because I cannot find work there. If South Africa sent me back even although I am old I would come back over the fence."

Another worker in the tomato fields, Anton Cosas, was earning R65 after 15 years. "I could earn more if I went to the towns like some of my friends have, but I don't want to get into trouble. If I just leave this farmer and I go next door, I am then illegal and can be sent back. I don't want to take any chances."

Anton's wife and five children in Mozambique depend on his wages. "Many of us have heard that the Government wants to send us back. If that happens I don't know what my family will do. We will just die."