

Riot in Beira

One person died when police used firearms to quell serious disturbances in Beira on 8 December, which arose when a group of war-wounded citizens tried to set free two of their colleagues who had been arrested on charges of looting.

On two occasions in the previous week, the group of disabled citizens had stolen tinned meat and vegetable oil from a warehouse belonging to the country's relief body, the Disasters Control Office (DPCCN). According to the official in charge of the warehouse, Francisco da Costa Pereira, when they first arrived, the group, about 30 strong,

marched into his office and demanded that he phone the Provincial Governor, "to tell him we've come to take what belongs to us".

"I told them I didn't know the governor's phone number", said Mr Pereira. "Then they wanted to know where the sacks of clothing were kept, and before I could show them they went into the warehouse and took all the products they wanted".

In their two raids the disabled protestors stole 197 boxes of tinned meat and 74 boxes of vegetable oil. These goods had been intended for displaced people in the northern provinces of Tete and Niassa.

After the second raid, the provincial government ordered the police and military command to take measures against the looters, pointing out that disabled people are not above the law.

As a result two people believed to have been organisers of the looting were arrested on the morning of 8 December. That afternoon, the rest of the group protested against the arrests.

They marched on the Beira City Police Command, in an attempt to invade the cells and set free the two detainees. They beat up a policeman on duty, and damaged a vehicle parked outside.

They then moved on to the provincial police headquarters, and the police claimed that by this time they had acquired firearms. They entered the building and the police say they were obliged to fire into the air to disperse them.

Ten of the demonstrators were arrested. The others hijacked a truck belonging to the Mozambican post office and forced its driver to drive them away.

As the truck sped off, the police shot out its tyres, bringing it to a standstill. The police said that one of the bullets accidentally struck and killed one of the demonstrators. They said he turned out to be a deserter from the armed forces, who joined the

disabled former soldiers in their protest "only to stir up trouble".

The police also attacked two reporters on the Beira paper *Diário de Moçambique*. The two journalists, Enoque Marcos and Fortunato Vicente, alerted by the sound of gunfire, had hurried over to the scene of the disturbance.

The police confiscated a roll of film, thus making it impossible for *Diário de Moçambique* to show its readers pictures of the incidents. They also damaged a camera and took away a notebook and pen.

The two reporters were beaten and kept in police custody for several hours. Only when the provincial police commander ordered their release were they set free. Mr Marcos and Mr Vicente then made their own way to hospital where their injuries were treated.

The police action against the journalists constituted a flagrant violation of several articles of the country's new constitution, guaranteeing freedom of the press, and protecting citizens against ill-treatment by agents of the state.

Towards the end of the month, the police formally denied that they had maltreated the journalists, and cast doubt on their story that they had sought medical assistance at Beira Central Hospital.

But in a sharp reply to the police claims, *Diário de Moçambique* published the note from the doctor who treated Mr Vicente. The doctor's note mentions cuts to Mr Vicente's head and a split lip, signs that are certainly consistent with a beating.