INTRODUCTION:
The crisis in Mozambique

EARLY IN 1987 television news teams once again brought into millions of homes pictures of another human disaster in Africa. But the story behind this drama was somewhat different to those in the better known famine areas of the Horn of Africa. In Mozambique, one of the world’s poorest countries, the effects of natural catastrophes have been tragically reinforced by years of guerilla warfare.

Nearly 100,000 people died in the famine of 1983-84 which followed years of drought. Serious drought is again threatening large areas of the country. Meanwhile, South African-backed rebel forces have devastated economic life and food production, forcing hundreds of thousands from their homes.

Nearly 2 million people now live in relief camps or crowd into isolated rural towns for refuge, their survival dependent on a fragile transport network subject to constant attacks. Almost half a million more people have fled to neighbouring states seeking food and safety, and many more live in daily fear of attack and harassment. Traditional methods of coping with drought have been disrupted by guerilla activity. With relief efforts in many areas largely blocked by war, hunger and crushing poverty are almost universal.

Yet Mozambique has great potential. It has vast reserves of fertile land capable of feeding both towns and country, as well as producing abundant crops for export. It has magnificent hardwood forests, large reserves of coal and marble and a beautiful coastline, ideally suited to tourism. Its geographic position makes it a natural trade route to the interior of southern Africa. At independence the health and education services were dramatically transformed to cater for the whole population, and a democratic system of local popular assemblies guarantees the people a voice in political life.

But Mozambique’s aspirations have been shattered by a grim catalogue of destruction; war and widespread banditry, drought, flooding, early policy mistakes and international recession. South Africa has supported a rebel movement which has bombed factories, railways and ports, and terrorised rural communities in a calculated campaign of maximum destruction.

Since 1984 Mozambique has been massively dependent on international aid. Food shortages have become chronic, and food is almost unobtainable on the market except at prices far above the spending power of ordinary people. Simple household goods, tools and clothes are so rare that trade is often dominated by a handful of black-marketeers.

Why are the people of Mozambique suffering so much? What hopes remain for peace, stability and an end of hunger?
FACTS & FIGURES

Area: 802,000km²
(3 × UK)

Population: 14 million, of which: ᴵ/₂ million refugees outside Mozambique;
2 million displaced within the country;
4 million dependent on aid

Life Expectancy: 44 (1980)

Child Death Rate: 350/375 per 1000
(0-5 years)

1 doctor for every:

Literacy: 39,000 (UK-1 to 680)
41% male, 15% female

Principal trade partners: EEC countries, USSR, USA, South Africa,
Japan

Principal aid donors: Sweden, Netherlands, EEC, USA, Norway,
UK

Principal Exports: Cashew nuts, prawns, sugar, tea, cotton,
timber and coal. All have fallen drastically in recent years, though cashew, cotton
and prawn exports are beginning to recover

Sources: Mozambique Information Office,
Unicef

In 1975 the Portuguese poured concrete down the lift shafts and stole the plans of the partially completed Four Seasons Hotel on the Costa do Sol in Maputo. Today it remains a concrete shell.
FAMINE AS A WEAPON OF WAR

TENS OF THOUSANDS OF REFUGEES from attacks by South African-backed rebels, the Mozambique National Resistance, are crowded into Mocuba, Quelimane and the remaining secure towns of Zambieza province. Many live out in the open, without clothes, work or adequate food; still more have fled to neighbouring Malawi, hungry and destitute, often suffering war wounds.

At Mocuba, in December 1986, some of these displaced people told Oxfam workers of their plight: "We left our homes with nothing, we have no blankets to sleep on or cover ourselves. We want to work and produce food but we need help."

"We have reached the conclusion that the bandits (the MNR) don't have human hearts. They kill and steal everything. We prefer the long walk through the bush . . . the bandits are worse than wild animals . . . look at this little girl (a girl of 8 or 9, wrapped in a sack); they dragged her out, took all her clothes and molested her."

A small hut alongside the meeting place is packed with women anxious to participate in the meeting, but too ashamed to appear in public without clothes. "We cannot send our children to school naked." "They burned all our homes, we have to sleep in the bush."

"They destroy everything. When we fought for independence we were careful about what we destroyed, because we were fighting for control over resources so we could use them ourselves. But what are they fighting for if they destroy everything?"

The big MNR offensive in late 1986 coincided with the planting season. People fled their lands and villages, without food, and without the prospect of a harvest to look forward to in 1987.

The relief workers explained, "About 600,000 people in the districts around Mocuba are now without supplies since the MNR began attacks on the road from Quelimane. The situation is extremely precarious with only 25 sacks of maize to distribute to 20,000 people in the town alone. A high proportion of children showed signs of serious malnutrition . . . people are in a state of shock. Families are split up as people flee in all directions from MNR attacks. They don't know if their husbands, wives, children or parents have reached safety; whether they are dead or alive."

By the summer of 1987 aid was at last able to get through to Mocuba but the events there have become horribly familiar in many other parts of the country. This tragic suffering has spread through most of Mozambique, and it threatens to continue indefinitely if South Africa does not stop fuelling the war.

The human crisis in Mozambique is at its worst ever. In Niassa, the country's most isolated province, Oxfam workers report a grave shortage of food amongst the poorest people; "One worker walked 60km one weekend but failed to find any maize, only a small bucket of potatoes in exchange for a shirt. The secondary school and the hospital have no food. There is a possibility of widespread starvation before the next harvest."

In the early 80's drought gripped much of central and southern Mozambique. Season after season of poor rains produced ever more meagre harvests. By 1983 hit and run MNR attacks on villages, shops and roads had also begun to take their toll, dragging the countryside into a downward spiral of deprivation and hunger. The poorest families, unable to produce or buy their daily grain, began to starve to death.

Systematic rebel action made the drought-hit areas almost inaccessible to emergency aid. Tete province suffered a hidden famine. The world was ignorant until people dropped dead in the city streets and tens of thousands trekked to neighbouring Zimbabwe in search of food. Many were too weak to survive the journey.

In Zimbabwe a refugee reflected, "Bombs and bullets haven't killed us, but hunger has". Yet bombs and bullets had stopped help from arriving in time to save thousands of lives.

In southern Mozambique, drought has persisted into the late 1980s; elsewhere flooding and waterlogging has destroyed crops. The wrecked economy ensures that marketed food production is pitifully low. But the principal enemy is a war in which the Mozambican people have become pawns in the wider crisis of southern Africa.
Waiting for food distribution at a relief centre in Inhambane.

Displaced people outside their makeshift homes in Chicualacuala district.
The late President Samora Machel with South African President P.W. Botha at the signing of the Nkomati Accord in March 1984.

Unable to return home because of MNR activity, a man recuperates outside Quelimane Hospital.

Nkomati: Pretoria's pious fraud

SOUTH AFRICA used the MNR to force Mozambique into dialogue. Although Mozambique refused direct talks with the MNR themselves, it signed a non-aggression pact, the 'Nkomati Accord', with South Africa in March 1984. Under its terms, first and foremost, neither side was to allow its territory to be used for attacks against the other. Mozambique promptly expelled all but a diplomatic mission of the ANC, seizing a handful of weapons. But the war within Mozambique continued to escalate and air drops of arms to the rebels continued.

South Africa was found guilty of violating the Accord when joint Mozambican and Zimbabwean forces overran the main MNR base in Mozambique, in Gorongosa National Park. They found documents detailing the continued collaboration of senior South African military men and government ministers with the MNR.

The South African Government admitted that Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister, Louis Nel, had visited Gorongosa after Nkomati, and that there had been 'technical contraventions' of the Accord by South Africa. But they claimed that the visits had been made with the knowledge of the Mozambican Government and in order to promote reconciliation. Evidence of South Africa's contravention of the Accord continues to take the form of reported sightings of South African-marked aircraft, especially around the Malawi border area at the time of the MNR's seizure of the town of Milanje in Zambezia Province in September 1986.

Mozambique initially hailed the Nkomati Accord as a victory but although it helped convince the world of the sincerity of Mozambique's search for peace, the Accord is now generally recognised to have been a failure, but it is still upheld by Mozambique.
AN MNR ATTACK:
An Oxfam Relief Worker’s report

ON THE MORNING OF 18TH JUNE 1986, MNR troops attacked Mikaune, 80km from Quelimane, provincial capital of Zambezia. Many people like Emilio John, a teacher, fled immediately. He knew he would be a target for killing or mutilation because he was a government employee. Later he heard that the school had been burnt down. 1,025 people fled to Quelimane where they were registering for emergency rations from the local National Disasters Office when I met them.

Carlos Correia, a local trader, told his story: “There were 500 of them, in three groups... I was lucky to escape. When we heard that the bandits were in town, everybody with shoes took them off, to appear poor. But they examined everyone’s feet and beat up those who had been wearing shoes, or decent clothes, or spoke Portuguese. They hit the party administrator about the head with a machete, shooting at him as he ran away. The bandits shot two others, and burnt an old man to death in his hut. Then they killed all the cattle from Madal (a state company), and after helping themselves to the meat, gave some to the poorest looking people, trying to get a few to join them.”

A further 1,112 people fled growing MNR maltreatment some days later, to Chinde relief centre, some 30km from Mikaune. Cortume Salesi and his family were dressed only in rags and sacks, all their belongings stolen by the MNR. Martha Marcalo, a young mother, wept inconsolably for her 7 year old son, taken to train as an MNR fighter, and her aged father, too weak for the treacherous journey through bush and mangrove.

The MNR occupation of Mikaune cut off Chinde, the northernmost island of the Zambezi delta, from Quelimane, so the relief centre can now only be supplied by boat. It receives a steady stream of war victims from the Zambezi valley, where the MNR devastated sugar production, forcing thousands of workers from their homes. I visited Chinde by plane; as the plane overflew Mikaune, a gun barrel flashed towards us and columns of smoke rose from burning buildings below.

This story is a familiar one, but MNR attacks are often more brutal. FRELIMO party members and state employees are singled out for killings, but in areas where the MNR are not established, destruction, mutilation, rape and murder can be indiscriminate. Horrifying tales are commonplace and well-supported.

In some areas, the MNR appear to exert tighter control and are less brutal to the population as a whole. Zambezia saw a big escalation of MNR activity in 1986, but here the rebel campaign has been sustained and organised, undermining loyalty to FRELIMO by targeting successful government projects and crudely attempting to win people over, stealing from those with a few possessions and giving a little to those with none.

The result is to turn the people against each other, reducing all to absolute poverty. The MNR provide no longer-term help to the poorest peasants — those whom they sometimes claim to be fighting for.
Expulsions and repatriations.

Movements of refugees and displaced people.

Areas regularly affected by drought.