

REFUGEES



A refugee from Tete rests by the roadside with her children and all her possessions.

IN A DESPERATE FLIGHT from famine and MNR harassment hundreds of thousands of Mozambicans crowd into district centres and remote coastal and border zones. As war frustrates relief supplies many flee to neighbouring states as refugees. The majority are women and children; often the men roam in search of food or work, but many are fighting, or killed in the war.

The exodus began in 1983, making news the following year when 100,000 Mozambicans were reported in Zimbabwe. Resettlement schemes and better rains allowed some to return, but numbers are again climbing dramatically, and now stand at over 400,000.

However, refugee numbers are difficult to estimate. Many disperse and settle amongst the host communities, so they are not registered with UNHCR or living in camps. South Africa and Malawi currently host the largest numbers of Mozambican refugees, as a result of MNR activity around their borders, but they are regarded as illegal migrants, and denied official refugee status. South Africa has forcibly returned refugees to Mozambique, and has erected an electric fence along a stretch of border; numerous deaths by electrification have been reported.

MNR seizures of border towns near Malawi boosted the exodus, and in the far south near South Africa, rural Mozambicans face MNR harassment on both sides of the frontier. Yet the relative ease of organising assistance outside can mean that life as a refugee can come to seem easier than life in war-torn Mozambique.

Hungry, destitute refugees are a visible human tragedy, but they are the thin end of a far greater wedge of human suffering within Mozambique. The real challenge is not just to bring them much-needed relief, but to eradicate the conflict causing this crisis, and create the conditions for countless thousands to return home to farm in peace.

Refugees meet a Mozambican health official in Zimbabwe.



Fernando Lima/AIM



Flooding of the river Umbeluzi after Cyclone Domoina in 1984.



Ian Bray

NATURAL DISASTERS

THE VAGARIES OF THE WEATHER compound Mozambique's man-made calamities. In the last decade, the country has been constantly hit by drought and floods.

Large areas have experienced cyclical droughts for much of recorded history. Centuries of colonial rule and decades of war have largely destroyed people's traditional mechanisms for coping with this; seasonal migrations, reliance on cattle and recourse to drought-resistant staple crops like millet, sorghum and cassava.

The interiors of Gaza, Inhambane and much of Tete have always been drought-prone, but from 1979–1984 low rainfall affected much wider areas. In 1981 Zambezia and Nampula suffered severe local droughts and numerous cases of paralysis occurred when people ate poisonous varieties of cassava root, all other crops having failed. In the next few years serious famine developed as the drought extended to Manica, Sofala and Maputo province as well as the usually drier zones. Food shortages affected nearly five million people, over a million suffered malnutrition, and 100,000 are thought to have died.

All Mozambique's major rivers tend to flood in the wet season, causing widespread damage to crops, roads, railways, bridges and buildings, as well as losses of human life and livestock. In 1977 the Limpopo and Incomati rivers flooded; in 1978 the Zambezi burst its banks over much of its length. These floods drove 220,000 people from their homes, causing US\$63.7 million worth of damage.

Tropical cyclones arising over the Mozambique channel also cause devastating floods. In 1979 Cyclone Justine hit northern Mozambique damaging agriculture, industry and the fishing fleet.

Then in 1984, Cyclone Domoina caused catastrophic flooding in Maputo province, after three successive years of drought. The floods hit the headlines where slow starvation and MNR attacks did not. Vast areas surrounding the Umbeluzi, Incomati and Maputo rivers were underwater for weeks, 109 people died and 50,000 lost their homes and all their belongings. Dams, bridges, pumping stations and railway tracks were destroyed, 3,000 hectares of sugar cane were lost as well as immeasurable quantities of food crops, worsening the grave food shortage already affecting the capital. Swaziland and South Africa had to open their floodgates to protect themselves, which left Mozambique to bear the brunt of the floods.

In 1985 the Limpopo flooded again, and in 1986, floods in the Zambezi valley washed away some of Tete's first harvests after three years of drought.

The Government established a Natural Disasters Office — DPCCN — in 1983, to respond to the immediate needs of people affected. The organization of relief camps and the rapid resettlement and reintegration of displaced people into economic life has been impressive. DPCCN staff, alongside health workers and teams from the Mozambican Women's Organization, OMM, have worked around the clock, often in dangerous insecure places to provide food, water, shelter and health care to the hungry and the destitute. But the shortages of fuel and transport, and the danger of enemy attacks, make supplying the population a logistical nightmare.

Maize crop ruined by drought in Chicualacuala.





Julian Quan

A women's cooperative in the 'Green Zones' of Tete city carried on producing maize at the height of the famine with the aid of irrigation.

AGRICULTURE



A vegetable growing scheme at Chinde centre for displaced people in Zambezia province.

MOZAMBICAN FAMILIES have traditionally lived as subsistence farmers on scattered family homesteads, clearing tracts of bush for cultivation and moving on after several years to allow fertility to recovery.

Under Portuguese rule men were recruited to grow cash crops — mainly cotton — and as migrant labour. This left the women on their own to produce all the family's food, a position many are still in today.

Traditionally, people ate drought-resistant crops — millet, sorghum and cassava — before the Portuguese introduced maize, which became a national staple. In drier areas maize may require irrigation, which means farms have to rely on imported machinery. In drought years maize often fails when traditional crops might have survived. Drought continues to frustrate farming in parts of the south, but MNR attacks on farms of all kinds are today the greatest threat. In addition, however, Mozambique's agriculture has also been bedevilled by policy problems.

At independence, Portuguese settlers abandoned their shops, businesses and farms, and the network of rural trade collapsed, causing big shortages of export and food crops. The FRELIMO Government tried to solve these problems by concentrating on big state farms using imported machinery. They expected too much, too fast and failed to support small family farmers.

The Government hoped to raise crop yields and rural living standards by encouraging collective organisation amongst generally scattered, individual peasant families. But cooperatives did not get enough practical support and the over-enthusiasm of inexperienced local officials for bureaucratically planned 'communal villages' led to frequent failures.

A key problem was the failure to supply the countryside with the basic goods that people wanted, such as cloth, soap, bicycles, radios, batteries, and tools. As it was, family farmers had little incentive to market either food or cash crops through official channels, so instead they sold any surplus they had on the black market.

The 4th Party Congress in 1983 rang some very positive changes, emphasising the need for "small scale projects" and noting that "... rural development must be based on wide-ranging support to the cooperative, family and private sectors". But war ensures that new policies are difficult to implement.

One giant state farm, 'CAIL' — the Limpopo Agro-Industrial Complex — has been divided up. The land has been turned over to private and cooperative farms and smaller, more manageable state-run units. Elsewhere, problems of the big state farms continue. In 1985 a Mozambican agronomist wrote that low yields largely result from "... lack of experienced, trained farm managers and workers ... farmwork is done systematically late, from seed-sowing to harvest ... organisational problems are worsened by machinery's poor state of repair ..."

What rural people in Mozambique need most is a reliable supply of locally adapted seed varieties, hand tools and basic consumer goods. Recent government crop-marketing campaigns have provided these in certain areas. As a result a number of cooperatives have been successful, particularly in the "green zones" — suburban farmlands producing food for the towns.



Aslak Aarhus

Carrying relief supplies alongside a railway line sabotaged by the MNR.