

Mozambique flood disaster shows legacy of colonial oppression

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The flood disaster in southern Africa continues to take its toll, with more heavy rain hindering the relief operation.

Mozambique has been most severely affected, but South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Swaziland and the island of Madagascar have also suffered. In Zambia, farmland downstream from the Kariba dam is flooded. Fifteen thousand people in the lower Zambezi Valley are in danger of starvation.

Madagascar was affected by recent cyclones and 600,000 people have been forced from their homes. Victims are sheltering in remote areas of the island. The World Health Organisation has warned that the flooding will exacerbate the country's cholera epidemic, which has killed more than 1,000 people this year. The floods have affected half a million people in Zimbabwe and thousands have been made homeless in South Africa.

According to the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), Mozambique has lost at least a third of the staple maize crop and 80 percent of its cattle. A quarter of the country's agriculture has been damaged. President Joaquim Chissano has appealed for \$250 million to repair damaged schools, roads, bridges, power lines, etc.—nearly four times his original estimate.

As well as food and medicine, the biggest priority is clean water. Survivors in some areas are being forced to choose between dehydration and the risk of drinking contaminated water. Thousands of people have contracted malaria from the swarms of mosquitoes breeding in the stagnant floodwaters.

The downpour in the southern African region began on February 3. Hundreds of people were killed and hundreds of thousands left homeless. In many towns and cities, there was no power or drinking water and food supplies were running short.

On February 11, Oxfam issued an international appeal for aid. Western countries have satellites that make it possible to forecast the weather weeks, or even months in advance, but for a month the crisis was ignored. Television viewers around the world saw pictures of desperate families stranded on rooftops or clinging to the tops of trees, without food or clean water for more than six days.

Tens of thousands remained trapped and many would die before relief could reach them. An appeal launched in Britain by 11 charities secured £3 million in pledges in just five hours and £14 million in less than a week. Rescue teams—fire and rescue workers and lifeboat crews—were telephoning the British government offering to travel to Mozambique.

However, government departments in London did nothing for days. Clare Short, Labour's Minister of International Development, insisted that the problem was not about money, but organisation. Her department was haggling with the Ministry of Defence about who would pick up the bill for the £2.2 million cost of sending out four helicopters. Neither department would accept responsibility, so the helicopters did not leave for three days and were not operational for another four days after that. A senior British army officer told the press that plans had been drawn up a week earlier.

Oxfam denounced the delay as "outrageous". A spokesman disputed the cost of £2.2 million claimed for "renting out" the helicopters, pointing out that they would have been in the air anyway in exercises over Salisbury Plain. "The Kosovo operation cost billions of pounds. In comparison we are talking about peanuts in Mozambique," he said.

The Labour government attempted to offset the criticism by announcing a new aid package to Mozambique—an extra £70 million "new money" in flood aid. It was later forced to admit this was not new money, but a deduction from the £76 million in aid committed a year ago.

In the United States the news was ignored even longer. It wasn't until Wednesday, March 1 that the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* carried inside briefs about the flooding. The following day the *Washington Post* printed an article: "Mozambique Story Edging Into View".

Reports were virtually non-existent on television until the following weekend. *USA Today* foreign correspondent Jack Kelley said that international relief groups began calling his paper almost immediately after the cyclone hit the area on February 27. "They were telling us their people had been missing for several days, asking us if we had reporters in there." He said that Africa just isn't that important to the media decision-makers. After a long delay, President Bill Clinton sent a joint task force including C-130 transport aircraft, helicopters and 900 troops, which arrived last Monday. The \$13 million it pledged is less than the cost of one cruise missile.

The scale of flood devastation is in large measure a consequence of poverty and lack of development. Despite its rich natural resources, Mozambique is one of the poorest countries in the world. The Portuguese sold probably 1 million people into slavery before the trade finally died out toward the end of the nineteenth century.

In the "scramble for Africa" at the end of the 1800s, Portugal sought to extend its administration throughout the country. After 1891 control of the central area was given to a private company—the Mozambique Company—formed with British and French capital. They were empowered to raise taxes, grant mineral and land concessions and issue currency. The Nyassa Company, owned by British and French interests, had similar concessions. The Zambezi Valley was divided among smaller concerns, including the British Sena Sugar Estates.

These companies raised most of their income through taxation and forced labour. Until as late as 1961, Mozambicans were press-ganged to work on colonial plantations, to build roads and railways, or perform any other task required by the Portuguese.

In 1926 a coup in Portugal brought the dictator Antonio Salazar to power. He took back control of Mozambique from the charter companies and introduced a form of apartheid rule. The south, around Maputo, became economically linked with South Africa. The government recruited labour for the mines and took half the workers' wages as commission. In some areas more than half the male population was absent, working in South Africa.

Throughout this whole period Mozambique supplied Portugal with

cheap raw materials, especially cotton for its textile industry. There were prohibitive laws stifling the development of Mozambique's indigenous manufacturing industry.

Following the Second World War, an anti-colonial movement swept across Africa. In Mozambique a 10-year guerrilla struggle against Portuguese rule began in 1964, led by the Liberation Front of Mozambique, Frelimo. The Portuguese forces were assisted by finance from the United States and Frelimo turned for support to the Soviet Union and China.

After the overthrow of the dictatorship in Portugal in April 1974, independence for Mozambique was negotiated within a year, handing state power to Frelimo. Tens of thousands of Portuguese fled the country, taking whatever goods and capital they could and destroying what they had to leave behind.

This was at the height of the Cold War. Mozambique was an ally of the Soviet Union and Frelimo attempted to develop the economy on the Soviet model. The land was nationalised and the state established agricultural estates.

Hundreds of small-scale farmers of Chokwe in the southern Gaza province were moved off their lands into communal villages. But this was in the period when international commodity prices for raw materials like cotton and sugar were falling catastrophically and international interest rates were rising. Hostile neighbouring governments imposed trade sanctions. These conditions, plus the effects of a civil war which raged for 17 years after independence, led to economic collapse.

The UN estimates that during the civil war almost 1 million Mozambicans lost their lives out of a population of 14 million. Four million people were internally displaced and nearly two million fled to neighbouring countries. By the mid-1980s famine was widespread; schools and hospitals were burned out or abandoned and factories were left in ruins. A famine in 1983-84 cost 100,000 lives.

The opposition forces of Resistencia Nacional Mocambicana (Renamo) were financed and directed by the American CIA. South Africa accused the Mozambique government of harbouring the African National Congress and supported Renamo militarily.

In March 1984 the Nkomati Accord was signed between South Africa and Mozambique, but the war continued until 1992, when the General Peace Agreement was finally signed.

In October 1987, with its economy in collapse, Mozambique made an agreement with the international banks. In exchange for increased credit, the government would adopt a "structural adjustment programme" and open the economy up to the world market. In November 1990 a new constitution was announced, introducing a free market economy and enshrining private property rights.

Portuguese traders returned to the country, including Joao Fereira dos Santos (JFS), a cotton company that had operated since colonial times. The "big three" companies of JFS, Entrepoto and Lonro collaborated with the state in a cotton monopoly—fixing the price small farmers obtained for their cotton to as little as £20 for a whole year's crop.

An Economic Reform Programme (PRE) was introduced in 1987, under which the government gave up state control of the economy. In order to prove its credit worthiness to Western financiers, the government tried to balance the budget by attacking the living standards of the impoverished masses. Food subsidies were removed and restrictions were imposed on state spending and credit. State-owned enterprises were privatised, government monopolies in education, health care and other services were ended and charges introduced.

The government liberalised exchange rates and the value of the national currency against the US dollar plummeted from 40 metical in 1986 to approximately 10,000 metical in 1996. A market in land was opened up, with the selling off of the 33,000 hectares of state farmland in 50-year concessions for commercial use. Many of the new concession holders had

no intention of putting the land to productive use and speculation and corruption became rampant.

Only recently Mozambique was being hailed as one of the "success stories" of the International Monetary Fund. In November 1995 it was admitted as a full member of the Commonwealth.

Popular wisdom has it that "the most remarkable change brought about by liberalisation is that once no one had much, now most people have nothing—while a few have it all." In Maputo a small elite of government officials and business people live in luxury, while the vast majority of the population suffer abject poverty.

Ninety percent of the population live on less than \$1 a day. According to Oxfam, seasonal workers in the tea plantations of mountainous Gurue work from dawn to dusk picking tea for less than 5 cents a day. Workers in the coconut factories work for 11 hours a day for \$8 a month.

In 1980 only 6 percent of the population had access to safe water. Today, 75 percent still do not have safe water. On the northern Mueda Plateau women have to walk a 14 kilometres round trip for water, carrying a 20-litre bucket on their heads.

Mozambique has one of the worst health records in the world. Officially its maternal death rate is 300 per 100,000 live births, but the national figure is more likely to be 1,000 deaths per 100,000 live births. (The figure in Britain is 8 deaths per 100,000). It has the highest child mortality rate in the world, with 27 percent of children dying before their fifth birthday. Life expectancy at birth is only 45.5 years.

Preventable diseases like malaria, diarrhoea, tuberculosis and other acute respiratory ailments are widespread. In February 1998, in the two cities of Maputo and Beira, there were more than 10,000 cases of cholera, including more than 400 deaths.

During the civil war some 85 percent of health facilities were destroyed, abandoned or could not be maintained. In 1991 private medicine was legalised. By 1993, only 30 percent of rural people had access to health services. There were 435 doctors for the whole country and only one nurse for every 4,500 people.

The education system was devastated by the civil war. Since 1987 it has suffered from further severe cutbacks due to public spending restrictions. Today only 50 percent of school age children receive any education. Oxfam has pointed out that even if the international lenders were to push through a delayed debt reduction, Mozambique would still be spending more than \$60 million a year in debt repayments. This compares with \$20 million on primary health care and \$32 million on education.

Mozambique is the most indebted country in the world relative to its income, and the most dependent on international aid. In 1992, some 80 percent of its state budget was financed by foreign aid. In 1995 it was still 60 percent of the state budget and 90 percent of the investment budget. That year overall foreign debt was \$5.4 billion—\$300 per head of population in a country where the average annual income was only \$80. In 1996 the cost of debt servicing was equivalent to 32 percent of the total value of exports of goods and services. A year later there was a budget deficit equivalent to 20 percent of gross domestic product.

International aid is tied directly to the restructuring programme and facilitates the penetration of global corporations. Vast natural gas fields have been discovered at Pande in the south. In 1995 the US government threatened to cut off all aid unless Mozambique signed a major gas deal with the American company ENRON.

The cashew nut processing industry is Mozambique's biggest industrial employer, with 10,000 workers. It was privatised in 1994. The government agreed to maintain a temporary export tax on unprocessed nuts to allow the new owners to modernise production. In 1995 the World Bank forced the government to reverse this policy, arguing that the market must decide. This allowed the free export of raw nuts to India, where children shelled them by hand, and the Mozambican factories closed.

In September 1997 the IMF and the World Bank announced that

Mozambique was eligible for debt relief under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative. In January 1998 the "Paris Club" of official creditors agreed to cancel 80 percent of Mozambique's debt, but not until the end of 1999, depending on the continued implementation of structural adjustment measures to facilitate private investment and free trade. In January this year, debt relief was delayed.

The government has plans to set up "Export Processing Zones", where international companies will be exempt from virtually all customs duties and taxes. In 1998 it signed a production sharing agreement with an international consortium led by South African and US interests, which was to invest \$30 million over seven years.

Mozambique is largely made up of coastal plains, most of whose rivers have their source and gather strength in neighbouring countries. The Zambezi River, for example, passes through 10 countries. Mozambique remains at the mercy of floods, irregular rains or drought.

Clearly what is required is a massive programme of water conservation coordinated throughout the whole region. But none of the countries in the area has the finance necessary to even attempt such a plan. When the second wave of flooding in Mozambique began, due to rivers bursting their banks after heavy rainfall upstream in Zimbabwe and South Africa, there was no system to share information about rising water levels. The Mozambican government has attempted to control water through building new dams, but didn't have enough money to complete the projects satisfactorily.

The plans made for water management have also been closely tied to the restructuring programme. The privatisation of the management of the urban water supply was one of the conditions imposed by the World Bank and others for loans to improve services. Similarly, the IMF's Enhanced Structural Adjustment Facility (ESAF) has laid down stringent conditions about the supply of water to rural areas. By 2002 the government must only supply water and sanitation services to those who can afford to pay for a privatised service.

From November 1999 management of the water supply systems in seven cities with a total population of 2.5 million was handed over to private operators. The firms involved are Saur International—part of the Aguas de Mocambique consortium—and Fundo de Investimento e Património do Abastecimento de Água. Saur forecast that its turnover for 1999 would rise by 6 percent to \$2.4 billion.

People are already returning to their homes, anxious to see what can be salvaged of their meagre possessions. Thousands of families have lost everything—homes, furniture, animals, crops and implements. One of the greatest dangers comes from the 2 million land mines left from the civil war and dislodged by the floodwaters.

The poorest families have no choice but to live on the most marginal and vulnerable land, like coastal zones and valley lands, that are prone to flooding. The upstream watersheds have been deforested and the soil can no longer retain the rainwater. The UN estimates that by 2025 half the world's population will be living in areas at risk from storms and other extreme weather.



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