

# Mozambique flood disaster returns

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Mozambique once again faces a flood disaster. This impoverished African country is still suffering from the effects of last year's devastating floods, which left 700 people dead and half a million homeless. This year's floods have already carried away thousands of homes, inundated vast areas of farmland and destroyed 27,000 hectares of crops, including staples such as maize, rice and cassava. At least 400,000 have been affected, with more than 40 people killed and 77,000 made homeless.

The main regions effected are in the central provinces of Zambezia, Tete, Maica and Sofala, which lie in the area drained by the Zambezi River and its tributaries. Neighbouring countries have also been hit. In Malawi 60,000 people have been made homeless and in eastern Zambia 15,000 have lost their homes. At the town of Caia, about 100 miles upstream from the mouth of the Zambezi, the river is two metres above its critical level. Water levels on the rivers Buzi and Save, which are being fed from the heavy rainfall in Zimbabwe, are being closely monitored.

The situation is expected to get worse as further heavy rain is forecast in the central region of Mozambique and for the neighbouring countries of Zambia, Malawi and Zimbabwe. The Kahora Bassa Dam on the river Zambezi is being fed by the heavy rain falling in Zimbabwe and Zambia, and is close to overflowing. If the sluice gates are opened to reduce the water level, it will result in a deluge further down the valley. Alan Hooker of World Vision said, "if it continues raining as forecast and if they open the dam as they may be forced to, we could see a major loss of life."

Joao Zamisa, head of planning at the Mozambican National Institute for Disaster Management, has made an urgent appeal for aircraft, fuel and money to evacuate and feed the hundreds of thousands of people already affected by the flooding. A £20m appeal fund has been launched. Last year millions of people all over

the world saw television footage of flood victims marooned on the tops of trees trying to escape the rising waters. One year later there is only one helicopter available to rescue people stranded by the floods and only four aircraft for transporting food and medicine. Many roads have been washed away and others are impassable. 17,000 people are living in temporary government camps. A further 80,000 people need to be evacuated, of which 10,000 are in immediate danger.

Despite the dangerous situation, many people are reluctant to leave. They are desperately poor and fear that they will lose their few possessions and be left destitute. The government has despatched riot police to force them to leave.

Whether the floods will be as catastrophic as last year is not yet clear, but meteorologists anticipate that this region of Southern Africa will continue to have serious flooding in the future.

International press coverage of last year's floods was initially scant. The floods began on February 9, but were not reported in the United States until March 1. Despite the expressions of sympathy from Britain's Minister of International Development, Clare Short, and other representatives of Western governments, the material assistance they provided was minimal. Britain contributed £2.2 million to the disaster fund and the United States just \$1.7 million. Last September Mozambican Prime Minister Pascoal Mocumbi told reporters that of the \$453m pledged at the donors' conference in Rome in May 2000, only around \$200m had been disbursed.

The scale of flood devastation, both last year and this, is in large measure a consequence of poverty and lack of development in the country. Despite its rich natural resources, Mozambique is one of the poorest countries in the world, ranked almost bottom in the Human Development Index. 40 percent of its population lives on less than \$1 a day and another 40 percent on less

than \$2. Two thirds of the population have no access to clean drinking water. Life expectancy is around 45 years of age. The government spends 2.9 percent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on debt repayment, compared with 2.1 percent on health.

The country was a Portuguese colonial possession until 1975. As late as 1961 Mozambicans were press-ganged to work on colonial plantations, to build roads and railways and perform any other tasks required by their Portuguese rulers.

In 1975, the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (Frelimo), which had led a ten-year liberation struggle, formed a government under President Samora Machel. However, the country was soon engulfed in a bloody civil war in which one million people lost their lives out of a population of 14 million. The opposition Renamo forces were financed and directed by the American CIA with the support of the South African apartheid regime.

A peace agreement was signed in 1992, but the legacy of colonialism and the prolonged civil war left a devastated country. Already in October 1987, with its economy in ruins, Mozambique had made an agreement with the international banks. In exchange for increased credit, the government agreed to adopt a "structural adjustment programme" and open up the economy to the world market. From November 1990 a new constitution guaranteed a free market economy and the rights of private property, as a result international companies have almost free rein in the country.

For a short period Mozambique was one of the most rapidly developing economies within Africa, with a growth rate of 10 percent per annum. The benefits, however, only went to a small minority of the population. Now the country faces a disastrous situation. Early this year a report issued by the United Nations Environment Programme stated Africa would face worsening weather conditions because of climate changes resulting from global warming. It warned of increased flooding in Mozambique and drought and famine in other areas.

The science and technology necessary to tackle the problems of water control and conservation in Africa already exist. But it would require the investment of massive resources, both human and material, and planning that extends beyond the present national boundaries. The World Bank, the IMF, Western

governments and the transnational companies have shown they have no interest in providing the resources necessary to resolve these problems.



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