

Food riots erupt in Mozambique

David Walsh
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Rioting continued in Maputo, Mozambique's capital city, for a third day on Friday in response to increased bread prices and the general rise in the cost of living. At least 10 people are dead, including a six-year-old girl and a 12-year-old boy, and more than 400 wounded as police have opened fired on angry demonstrators. Hundreds of people have been arrested.

Protests have also occurred in Matola, a neighboring city to Maputo, and in Beira and Chimoio, urban centers in the central part of the southeast African country.

The riots and strikes, organized primarily by cellphone text messaging, are the popular response to sharp increases in water and electricity rates, and in particular to the government's announcement that bread prices would climb by 25 percent on September 6.

Mozambique, a former Portuguese colony, is one of the most impoverished nations in the world, ranked 175th out of 179 countries on the UN Human Development Index. Seventy percent of the population of 23 million survives beneath the poverty line and an estimated 54 percent are unemployed; the statutory minimum wage is US\$37 a month. Annual per capita income for the population as a whole is only \$807.

Some 16 percent of the Mozambican people are infected with HIV, and more than 1 million of the country's children do not attend school. According to the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition, 44 percent of children "suffer from stunted growth and nearly 20 percent of those under 5 are underweight" (Associated Press).

Demonstrations began in Maputo Wednesday after several days of rumors of impending protests. According to news reports, thousands of people lined the streets of Bagamoyo, an impoverished neighborhood north of the capital city's downtown.

Police declared the action illegal, on the grounds that no group had applied for a permit, and attempted to break up the protest. The primarily youthful crowd responded by burning tires, barricading streets and throwing stones at police. Shops, gas stations and buses were also damaged. Several wagonloads of corn near a railway station were seized by protesters.

The major highway connecting South Africa to the port of Maputo was reportedly blocked in several places, by tree trunks, utility poles, rocks, tires and other debris.

The police acted with brutality, opening fire on the crowds. The claim by spokesman Pedro Cossa that police used no live ammunition, but only rubber bullets, was belied by the death toll and the wounded who poured into Maputo hospitals. (A different police official asserted that units fired their weapons only "after they ran out of rubber bullets"!)

A report from AFP commented, "Doctors at Maputo Central hospital said victims of the protests streamed into the wards throughout the evening, most with gunshot wounds. 'We have treated over 100 people since the violence started yesterday, many patients had gunshot wounds,' said Antonio Assis da Costa. 'The last patients came in around 1:00 a.m., most of them were young boys,' added the doctor."

On Thursday, the protests continued. A street vendor told AFP, "Yesterday I received an SMS [text message] saying the strike must continue for three more days." The country's public television meanwhile "showed images of running battles between police and residents of shantytowns outside Maputo."

The army was also apparently called out in force. Police spokesman Cossa claimed Thursday that "the army was called on to carry out the clean-up in the streets and not to restore order. Since last night it has helped Maputo City Municipal Council to clean the city." Other observers, however, maintained that the army was patrolling the streets of the capital.

Protesters, many of them youthful, have called on President Armando Guebuza, of the ruling Frelimo party, to resign. Frelimo, which has ruled Mozambique since independence from Portugal in 1975, is a corrupt, bourgeois outfit, which especially since the mid-1980s has opened the country up to foreign investors. The latter are especially interested in "Mozambique's untapped oil and gas reserves, and titanium mining is a growing source of revenue," according to the BBC.

Guebuza, also according to the BBC, is a former member of Frelimo's armed wing during the independence struggle

against Portugal and now “a millionaire businessman...who made his fortune in the energy, transport and port industries.”

The regime, insulated from the poverty and fury of broad layers of the population, reacted with predictable bluster and demagoguery to the riots and strikes. Government spokesman Alberto Nkutumula told a press conference September 2 that, “The [bread] price increase is irreversible. Prices will only fall if all of us work hard.”

Guebuza, in a nationally televised address, said he understood the anger of the people over rising prices, but was upset about the violence of the protests. “It is sad that people used the right to demonstrate peacefully to turn it into violent protests.... The government is aware of the poverty of the people. Combating poverty is part of the government’s five year plan.”

Frelimo was returned to power, and Guebuza to a second term as president, in general elections held in October 2009, with approximately 75 percent of the vote. However, only 44 percent of the electorate cast ballots, and there were numerous claims of voting fraud.

The Mozambique News Agency (AIM), pushing the government line, slandered the protesters, claiming that television interviews with rioters showed that some “were clearly drunk.” The government news agency went on, “The rioters interviewed made no specific demands, but merely complained about the high cost of living. Implicit in this, perhaps, is a call for the government to subsidise basic foodstuffs.

“However, the government—which is already subsidizing fuel—has ruled out any further blanket subsidies. Several of the recent price rises are beyond the government’s control—the strength of the South African currency, the rand, has dictated a rise in prices denominated in the Mozambican currency, the metical, for all goods imported from South Africa.”

The government blamed the bread price increase on “the relative shortage of wheat on the world market,” produced in part by the drought and fires in Russia, which has led the Russian government to impose a ban on wheat exports.

Moreover, argued the news agency, with remarkable arrogance and indifference, the poverty of the Mozambican population, only about 14 percent of whom have access to electricity, makes the increases in the cost of electricity “a most unconvincing excuse for a riot.”

Behind the upheavals in Mozambique lie the ongoing global economic crisis and recent, painful increases in food prices, which threaten millions worldwide with hunger or even starvation.

As the government news agency reports, in 2009, “Mozambique exports fell by 19 percent compared to 2008,

due to falling international demand and lower prices. In the face of these setbacks, Mozambique has seen increases in the price of fuel, energy, water and bread.”

A report issued by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Food Programme argued that due to a skewed rainfall pattern favoring Mozambique’s north and leaving its south dry, “250,000 people from low-income households in the semi-arid and arid areas of Tete, Gaza, Inhambane and Sofala provinces will require some 40,000 tons of emergency food assistance to meet their basic dietary requirements from August until the next harvest in March 2011.”

João Mosca, a Maputo-based economist, told the IRIN news service that in 2009, Frelimo “suppressed price rises to woo voters. Manipulating the economy during the electoral period has now led to generalized price increases, Mosca said, but [the] ‘government has to be conciliatory, otherwise the riots might continue.’”

Global food prices are rising, raising the specter of 2008’s widespread rioting. The FAO noted September 1 that the world food price index had risen by 5 percent from July to August, reaching its highest level in two years.

The agency also forecast the 2010 wheat crop would decline by 5 percent over last year, reflecting a cut in Russia’s harvest.

The Associated Press commented Friday that the street protests in Mozambique were only the most recent sign of popular unrest. “Countries from Asia, to the Middle East to Europe are feeling the strain.” In Egypt, “recent protests over rising food prices left at least one person dead.” Prices of many food items in flood-ravaged Pakistan have risen by 15 percent or more following the destruction of 20 percent of the country’s crop and agricultural infrastructure.

“In China,” writes AP, “officials are threatening to punish price gougers, while in Serbia, a 30-percent hike in the price of cooking oil reported for next week has led to warnings of demonstrations by trade unions.”



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