

# Mozambique victimized by floods and the IMF

by Uwe Friesecke

The scandalous reaction of Western governments to the natural disaster of floods, caused by two successive cyclones, which have destroyed Mozambique during the last five weeks, killing probably thousands and uprooting more than 2 million people, exposes once again the moral indifference and political hypocrisy of these governments in respect to Third World countries.

The floods started on Feb. 9, with heavy rainfall across Southern Africa, and Cyclone Connie hitting Mozambique. Already by Feb. 11, the United Nations warned that the lives of 150,000 people were in immediate danger from lack of food and from disease. In response to a request by the U.S. Embassy, the U.S. Department of Defense on Feb. 17 deployed a Humanitarian Assistance Survey Team to Mozambique and South Africa. By then, all Western embassies in Maputo, Mozambique's capital, were fully aware of the immediate danger, and that the Mozambique government was overwhelmed by the crisis. But almost nothing was done.

Then, on Feb. 22, tropical Cyclone Eline hit with full force the Mozambique coast near the central city of Beira. Combined with continuing heavy rainfall in the rest of southern Africa, torrents of water were sent down the rivers in Mozambique during the following five days, flooding an area almost the size of Germany along the Limpopo and Save rivers, and inundating entire large cities, such as Chokwe. Thousands of people were trapped on rooftops and in trees, and still there was no significant reaction from governments in Europe or the United States.

Only South Africa went into action, sending in military helicopters which started rescuing the stranded people. It took the U.S. President another full week, until March 1, to announce an American rescue effort, in which helicopters were to arrive beginning on March 6. The German government also began making decisions only on the morning of March 1, for deployment of helicopter crews by March 5. The French Navy even had a helicopter carrier on a visit in Cape Town, South Africa, but it wasn't deployed to Mozambique to help in the rescue.

The heroic South African helicopter crews saved more than 12,000 people. We will probably never know how many people drowned because helicopters from the United States, Britain, and Germany arrived too late. Even if one takes into account the logistical difficulties, of long distances and the lack of infrastructure in the region, there is no excuse for

these governments and their embassies to have ignored the catastrophe for weeks, and to have done nothing in preparation for the emergency. Again, only after TV cameras started showing the human desperation, did foreign ministers finally react. These governments, of the European Union, the United States, and Canada, proved once more how shallow their talk of defending human rights everywhere in the world really is.

## Why Mozambique was defenseless

But, there is another reality to Mozambique's catastrophe. The country was praised as a success story of Africa. After the 1992 peace agreement between Maputo and rebels who have been fighting nearly since independence in the 1970s, it supposedly had achieved an economic growth rate of 10% in recent years. But, why was the country completely defenseless against such a natural disaster? Because, Mozambique's success was not in the real economy; it was only a "success" in the eyes of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and international financial investors.

For the 18 million people in Mozambique, there has been no economic recovery. The average per-capita annual income is still less than \$100. Some 50% of the population are illiterate, and 80% live in abject poverty. There are only 200,000 jobs in the formal economy. But, the country paid about \$125 million every year on its \$6 billion foreign debt obligation.

Therefore, in the seven years since the end of the civil war, neither significant infrastructure development nor broad-based development of agriculture and industry, have taken place. Only those projects which would allow international investors to extract more raw materials from the African continent, such as the aluminum smelter near Maputo, were even planned.

If the rivers in Mozambique cannot be tamed through large-scale water management projects, the country will always be vulnerable to such natural disasters. If Western governments now offer paltry debt relief of some hundred million dollars, it is another form of political hypocrisy, because the same governments still insist that Mozambique fulfill all of the IMF conditionalities, which continue to further ruin the country. If any Western government was seriously concerned with Mozambique's future, it would propose complete cancellation of all foreign debt, and it would work for the creation of a new, just world economic order, in which large-scale infrastructure projects, such as water management for Africa's river systems, could be carried out.

Because, the problem is not just Mozambique's inability to cope with a natural disaster. It is a continent-wide problem. While people drown because there is too much water in southern Africa, they die of hunger for lack of water in Kenya and Somalia. Unless the West breaks with the destructive policy of the IMF and World Bank, cancels all of Africa's debt, and begins a Marshall Plan-type of development for the entire continent, we will see many more so-called "natural disasters" taking their toll among the people of Africa.