

Mozambican Contract Labour in South Africa

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*From testimony by Dr. Eduardo C. Mondlane to the
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The annual emigration of Mozambicans to South Africa, is estimated at 500,000 able-bodied men between the ages of 18 and 55, and is governed by a series of agreements between South Africa and Portugal, beginning from the year 1897. In that year an agreement was made between Portugal and the then Republic of the Transvaal, followed by the *Modus Vivendi* of 1901, the Transvaal-Mozambique Convention of 1909 and the Portuguese-South African Convention of 1928, revised in 1934, 1936, and 1940. All of these agreements between Portugal and South Africa were that the gold and diamond mine interests of the Transvaal are to be granted large-scale labour recruiting privileges in at least the southern province of Mozambique, in return for guaranteeing that a certain proportion of the seaborne traffic of the industrial centre of South Africa, which includes Pretoria and Johannesburg, must pass through the Port of Lourenco Marques rather than through the South African ports of Durban, East London, Port Elizabeth and Cape Town. Other benefits to accrue to Portugal are: direct monetary payments per African recruited, guaranteed repatriation of all clandestine emigrants, maximum contract time, and permission to establish Portuguese Native Affairs inspection and tax-collecting facilities (*curadorias*) on South African territory.

At the turn of the last century about three-quarters of the total African labour force on the mines of the Transvaal were from Mozambique.¹ According to a Transvaal Labour Commission report, for the first twenty years of the industry's development the gold mines were almost entirely dependent upon the East Coast for their labour. As another reporter puts it, 'The Mozambique boy (*sic*) may, therefore, be described as the pioneer coloured labourer of the Witwatersrand.'² ¹

Since then, the African people of Mozambique have spent the most productive years of their lives helping to develop an economy for which they themselves received almost nothing, but which has, as is well known, enriched and continues to enrich the white people of South Africa and, to a certain extent, has profited and continues to profit the Portuguese Government.

Without going into the details of hazards through which generations of Mozambicans have gone and in which thousands of our people have lost their lives, we would like to underline a few points.

In the twelve years between 1902 and 1914, over 43,000 Mozambicans dies as a result of mining accidents and disease while employed by the Chamber of Mines of the Rand.³ It is quite likely that a greater number of our people died at home as a result of diseases and accidents incurred in the

mines. All through my experience in Mozambique I cannot recall a single family that does not count the loss of at least one man who either died in the mines of South Africa or came home with an illness contracted in the mines and died a few years later. According to the 1954 annual statistics of Mozambique, the total number of Mozambican people who died in South Africa in the years between 1902 and 1940 stands at 81,166.⁴

Even if this great loss of our people were related to the economic development of our own country and for the benefit of our own people, it would be greatly deplored. However, the situation is worse. These thousands of Mozambicans have died to satisfy the economic greed of both the South African whites and the Portuguese.

Having grown up in the area where most of the people who compose this labour force come from, I should like to indicate in a few words some of the consequences of this migratory system of labour to their families back home. Most of the labourers stay an average of fifteen months in the mining areas, even though the contract allows for a maximum sojourn of eighteen months. During those fifteen months their services are lost to their wives and children. So that, while normally men help to build the huts and granaries of the family, besides clearing the forests and thickets to enable the women to cultivate the land and sow the seeds, they also provide an important element in the total life of a family. The many emotional problems which the wives of these men have to face as a result of their husbands' absence from home for so long cannot be told in a statement of a few minutes.

Nor is this all. In order to make certain that a large number of men leave their homes to work either in South Africa or in Mozambican plantations, industries and government projects, the Portuguese Government has from time to time passed laws to force Africans to leave. These are the so-called *contract labour* laws. In order to justify this, of course, the same kind of arguments and rationalizations, which we have already pointed out, are brought forth. Even as late as the 1940s a Portuguese governor stated the following:

The problem of native manpower . . . is probably the most important preoccupation of European agriculture. Generally speaking, throughout the various seasons of the year, there is an insufficient number of workers for the accomplishment of the undertakings which have been planned. The recruiters struggle with great difficulties to engage the needed numbers of workers . . . The supply of labour in Africa cannot continue to depend upon the whim of the black man, who is by temperament and natural circumstances inclined to expend only that minimum of effort which corresponds to his minimum necessities.⁵

Forthwith, the governor went on to define the conditions under which Africans are considered to be idle and, therefore, obliged to seek employment. In subsequent circulars, the governor reaffirmed the principle that all

African males are presumed to be idle unless they can supply proof to the contrary, thus:

1. All active native males between the ages of 18 and 55 years of age are obliged to prove that they live from their work.
2. The required proof is satisfied in the following ways:
 - (a) Be self-employed in a profession, in commerce, or industry, by which he supports himself.
 - (b) Be employed permanently in the service of the State, administrative corps or private persons.
 - (c) To have worked for at least six months in each year as a day labourer for the State, administrative corps or private persons.
 - (d) To be within the period of six months after having returned from the Union of South Africa, or the Rhodesias, from a legal contract in conformity with international agreement.
 - (e) Be a cattle-raiser, with at least fifty head of cattle.
 - (f) Be registered as an African farmer under the terms of the Statute of the African Agriculturist approved by the Legislative Diploma No. 919 of 5 August 1944.
 - (g) To have completed military service and be in the first year of reserve status.

Africans who cannot supply proof in any of the above terms are considered to be idle and as such are subject to recruitment by the Government for six months of labour in the public interest.

Since, as is obvious from the above, the standards by which 'being employed' are given by a government whose cultural values are different, most able-bodied Mozambicans can never supply sufficient proof that they are gainfully employed. Consequently, Mozambicans are constantly pushed from one situation into another. They either have to offer their services to South African, Rhodesian, Tanganyikan mining, farming and plantation interests at very low wages, or face the Portuguese police and be sent to government projects, or be made available for local economic interests which often pay much less than mining interests in South African and the Rhodesias.

As can be seen from the above, an African worker is not allowed to stay more than six months in his own home. This conclusion arises from the fact that most Africans live in areas where there are no industries or European agricultural projects which can offer permanent employment or which can enable them to be employed while living at home. The South African mines have strict regulations against employing individuals who can bring their families. So that all of the estimated 400,000 Mozambicans who are out of their country at any given time have left their families behind. More than this, the above regulation means that a whole range of an African's traditional family responsibilities are expected to be fulfilled within six months (of any given year).

It is clear from this that the Portuguese Government wishes to gain something out of the migratory labour to South Africa, as well as to make certain that the conquered people of Mozambique are exploited as much as possible by white people within the country. An analysis of the conditions acceptable as proof of significant economic activity reveals a deep politico-economic commitment to the international *status quo* first established in 1897, and then to the perpetuation of the migratory flows to both foreign and domestic destinations at the expense of the development of African agriculture. Out of the seven acceptable proofs of significant economic activity, only two refer to activities which can normally be carried out within the precincts of the traditional African homestead. Five of these conditions involve the male either in migratory forms of employment or in activities requiring the removal of his family to an urban environment. The two exceptions, items (e) and (f), are conditions which can be met only in an insignificant percentage of cases.⁶ ~

According to the instructions supplied with the 1950 Census Form, the occupation of all active African males who had no specific kind of employment was to be denoted by the term 'worker'. In the southern province alone, 183,294 males were so designated. Those, together with the 157,000 men registered in the Curadoria do Transvaal, constituted about 85% of the active male population of the southern area. For the same year, the census lists 1,246 southern males as exercising the profession of cattle-raiser, while 23,473 were classified as farmers. Most of the men classified as agriculturists or farmers by the census were probably merely engaged in the production of rice or cotton, both of which enjoy special status in the economy of the country. This means that in 1950 only some 25,000 or 7% of the southern male work force was in a position to provide proof of not being 'idle' by citing activities which did not involve urban or migratory wage employment. The remaining 93% constitute the pool from which foreign and domestic wage labour requirements are being met.

The control of our working people in Mozambique by Portugal and their use in the mines of South Africa is one of the most shocking examples of man's inhumanity to man. So long as we remain under the iron hand of Portuguese colonialism, we will continue to be used by both the Portuguese and the South African whites, and by whatever outside groups have invested capital in South African gold mining.

When discussing the problems hinted at above with those Portuguese who have never lived in any of the Portuguese colonies, one is struck by the insistence on quoting the various legal measures which the Portuguese Colonial Government has from time to time felt embarrassed enough to enact against those whites who are likely to abuse their privileged position. Often foreigners are taken in by the same trick. It is interesting to note here that practically all important labour legislation in Portuguese Africa came soon after an uproar had occurred against slave labour practices, during which Portugal claimed that there had been no forced labour. Yet each one of these laws is aimed at discouraging the same practices which the Government so

loudly denies.

The African worker in Mozambique has never had and will never have protection against the Portuguese exploiters so long as the people have no voice in the government of the country . . .

In this connection, I should like to call attention to the fact that, under the terms of the already mentioned Portuguese-South African Agreement, the South African Chamber of Mines is granted permission to recruit in Mozambique an average of 100,000 labourers per annum. In exchange, South Africa pays Portugal some \$6 per labourer, and allows the Portuguese government to collect head taxes directly from the labourers, and guarantees that a minimum of 47.5% of the seaborne import traffic to, and exports from, the area of Johannesburg-Pretoria will pass through the port of Lourenco Marques. When one adds to this those remittances which derive from Africans working in the Rhodesias, and Africans who have non-conventionally entered South Africa, proceeds from African emigrants compose a large proportion of Portuguese wealth.

No wonder, then, that Portugal is not only unwilling to give up her colonial empire, but also refuses to give information on her Territories in Africa. She is afraid that once the rest of the world comes to know the truth about her colonial practices, she will not be able to resist the furore that would result.

Consequently, Portugal is devising every means she can go keep the Africans of Mozambique ignorant, and oppressed.

Notes

1. Transvaal Labour Commission, 1904, p. 28.
2. *The Gold of Rand*, 1927, p. 58.
3. Louta Ribeiro, 1902, *Annario de Mozambique*, Lourenco Marques, Imprensa Nacional.
4. *Anuario de Mozambique*, 1940; *Anuario Estatistica*, 1940, 1954.
5. J.T. Bettencourt: Circular 818/D-7, 7 December 1942.
6. Harris, Marvin, 'Labour Emigration among the Mozambique Thonga: Cultural and Political Factors', *Africa*, Journal of the International African Institute, pp. 50-66.