MORE THAN 480 DIE IN ANTI-GOVERNMENT ATTACK ON MOZAMBIAN VILLAGE

AKRON, Pa. -- More than 480 people were killed in an attack by anti-government rebels on the coastal town of Homoine in Mozambique's Inhambane province last weekend. Homoine is about 300 miles northeast of Maputo, the capital of Mozambique.

Official reports from the scene of the July 18 killings indicate that the Homoine townspeople had been forced to march along a road and were killed as they walked, the New York Times reported July 22. People in the area surrounding the town were also killed.

The rebels started their attack at the town's 50-bed hospital. Only one person of the hospital staff was alive at the end of the 10-hour attack, which began at 5:45 a.m.

Mark van Koevering, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) agriculture worker who had moved to the town only 10 days earlier, was in a hotel, just a block from the hospital during the attack. He was living in the hotel because construction of the house where he will live is not yet completed.

Van Koevering, who is from Rockford, Mich., and a member of the River Terrace Christian Reformed Church in East Lansing, Mich., was not harmed during the attack. "My only pain is the death of so many people," he told João Muthombene July 21. "Psalms 23 -- 'The Lord is my shepherd...' -- stayed in my mind during the attack."

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Muthombene is Van Koeveering's supervisor and director of the projects department of the Christian Council of Mozambique (CCM).

When the attack ended, Van Koeveering was among the first people to begin moving the injured to Maxixe, a town 24 kilometers (about 15 miles) east of Homoine, for treatment. The survivors also fled to Maxixe where security is now very tight, reports Muthombene.

Homoine is the administrative center of Chinjinguir, a 20,000-hectare (49,400-acre) area that was once a "major bread-basket for the southern half of the country and that could again provide substantial amounts of food," notes James Shenk, director of MCC East Coast, who worked in Mozambique from 1982 to 1986. "How sad that the rebels chose to attack this area now, at a time when about 4.5 million of Mozambique's 14 million people face starvation."

The area is "at the very heart of a government attempt to allow more free enterprise and to support private and family agriculture," he continues. "Mozambican churches, through the CCM, have provided 1,000 ox-drawn plows, seeds and thousands of agricultural tools to families there. Nongovernmental organizations, Western bilateral donors and the United Nations have been supporting agricultural work in the area as well."

Homoine is very small, he adds. The attack "must have eliminated at least half of the town's people."

Government officials in Maputo, the capital, blame the South African-backed Mozambique National Resistance, known as Renamo, for the attack. Renamo was organized in 1976 by white-ruled Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, and has been waging a war of terror and destabilization in Mozambique ever since.

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This 11-year war has forced many people who could grow food to leave their homes in the countryside, noted Dinis Sengulane, Anglican bishop from Mozambique, in a May 7 chapel service at MCC headquarters in Akron. This has exacerbated the food shortage caused by drought. The war has also destroyed more than 200 health care centers and rural hospitals in the country.

"The churches in Mozambique pray and work constantly for peace," Sengulane said. But calling for peace in the midst of war is difficult, he observed. It is too easy to be perceived, wrongly, as taking one side or another. "We praise God that the church and its leaders have not been divided by war."

While Mozambican churches are not divided by the war in their country, the U.S. government is. The Reagan administration's strategy has been to increase ties to Mozambique's government in order to lessen that country's dependence on Moscow. In March it pledged $75 million worth of food aid for the country.

A group of senators, though, are pressuring the administration to abandon its support for the Maputo government in favor of Renamo. They portray Renamo as an anti-communist insurgency with popular support. State Department officials say Renamo has little support and is kept alive by aid from South Africa.

-Charmayne Denlinger Brubaker, MCC Information Services
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