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Red alert lifted, except in Zambezi Valley

The Mozambican government on 22 February lifted the “Institutional Red Alert” in all river basins, with the major exception of the Zambezi. At the end of a meeting of the Council of Ministers (Cabinet), the government spokesperson, Deputy Justice Minister Alberto Nkutumula, told reporters that the warning had been downgraded to an orange alert for the other major rivers in the south and centre of the country – the Incomati, the Limpopo, the Save, the Pungoe, the Buzi and the Licungo.

The decision, he said, was taken after an analysis of the current state of the rainy season, now drawing to a close, and the flooding that has affected several of the river basins. The reduction in the amount of rainfall has allowed the alert to be downgraded a notch.

But in the Zambezi valley, the river is still above flood alert level, and the government decided to maintain the Red Alert for a further week. At Caia and Marromeu, in the central province of Sofala, the river is 26 centimetres and 1.15 metres respectively above alert level.

Nkutumula added that teams of the National Civil Protection Unit (UNAPROC) will remain in the basins where the red alert has been lifted, in order to carry out rescue operations or otherwise assist people who may be affected in the event of renewed heavy rains, or a further rise in the level of the rivers.

Resettlement of people affected by the latest Zambezi flooding is under way in Marromeu district, in the central province of Sofala. The government has begun to demarcate and clear plots of lands where resettled families can build new homes. Kits of building materials are being distributed.

The health of people evacuated from the flood-prone areas has been checked, and the authorities are distributing water purification kits to ensure that people in the resettlement areas have clean drinking water.

Six flood deaths in Gaza

According to authorities in the southern province of Gaza, six people died of drowning during the current rainy season. The victims were two fishermen, a woman, a child and two youths, who met their deaths under varying circumstances in the districts of Massingir, Guija, Chibuto, Bilene and Xai-Xai.

The floods affected 23,632 households and destroyed 12,440 hectares of crops. Most of this area (10,740 hectares) had been planted with maize.

Three health units in Chokwe district were destroyed by the floods and torrential rains, while flooded roads made it difficult for patients to gain access to 19 other health units. Although the rivers have now subsided, several stretches of road remain impassable.

At the height of the flooding, on 24 January, the Limpopo at Chokwe was measured at 6.85 metres, massively above the flood alert level of four metres – though far short of the 8.46 metres measured during the catastrophic floods of February 2000. Now, a month later, the river has dropped to three metres.

Although the rainy season is not officially over until the end of March, it is thought unlikely that there will be any further serious flooding on the Limpopo.

President Guebuza denounces “inconceivable” violence

President Armando Guebuza on 24 February expressed his “serious concern” at the violence and loss of life in the uprisings sweeping across the Arab world.

“We call for the end of violence and for respect for human life”, said President Guebuza, who was opening a session of the National Committee of the Association of Veterans of the National Liberation Struggle (ACLLN) in the southern city of Matola.

“What we are witnessing is inconceivable. Human life is being despised and cut down in the most brutal and cruel manner”, declared President Guebuza. “Nothing should justify the deaths of citizens and the destruction of property”.

The President stressed the need for dialogue to overcome disagreements. “Dialogue is the most appropriate mechanism for sharing and socializing challenges and for building consensus”, he said.

Economic impact of HIV/AIDS discussed

More than half of the funds for health activities in Mozambique are channelled to the fight against HIV/AIDS, according to Health Minister Alexandre Manguele. Speaking at a Maputo Forum on the "Economic Impact of HIV/AIDS", Manguele put the total annual health budget at $138.7 million, with the HIV/AIDS area swallowing $78 million.

The minister recognised that the main problem for health care in the country has always been under-financing. People still had to walk long distances to the nearest health unit, the country was chronically short of ambulances, and faced a high maternal mortality rate – but resources had to be channelled away from these problems to meet the threat of AIDS.

Manguele admitted that "nobody is satisfied" with the results from the massive advertising campaigns on AIDS, "but if we hadn't done that advertising the situation would have been much worse".

The number of people receiving the life-prolonging anti-retroviral drugs has now reached around 250,000 – but Manguele acknowledged that of the estimated 1.4 million HIV-positive Mozambicans, some 650,000 had now reached the stage in the disease when they ought to be receiving anti-retrovirals.

Salim Vala of the Ministry of Planning and Development said that between 2000 and 2010 about $100 million was spent because of losses of staff caused by HIV/AIDS. Highly skilled personnel died at the height of their careers, and had to be replaced. Thus resources that could have been spent on other development areas were used to make good the losses caused by AIDS. Vala estimated that AIDS had knocked one per cent per year off Mozambique's economic growth rate.

Romeu Rodrigues, the chairperson of the Association of Businesses against AIDS (ECOSIDA), stressed the impact of the disease in robbing companies of skilled and experienced workers. On the Mozambican labour market it was difficult to find replacements for people with 10 or 15 years of experience who fell victim to AIDS.

One bright spot was that 720 companies were now members of ECOSIDA, and 120,000 of their workers have been involved in HIV/AIDS awareness programmes.

Economist Constantino Marrengula warned that, because it struck down people of productive age, AIDS could have an impact on the competitiveness of the economy. With all the costs that AIDS imposed on households, companies and the state, "the level of savings in the economy, already low, will drop still further".

The latest statistics on HIV/AIDS published last year after the first genuinely national survey, with a sample of over 18,000 people, showed an HIV prevalence rate of 11.5 per cent among people aged between 15 and 49. But there was a sharp gender difference – the rate among women was 13.1 per cent, and among men 9.2 per cent.

The survey showed that poverty does not cause AIDS. For it turns out that the people most at risk of catching HIV are not poor illiterates living in the countryside, but the relatively rich and well-educated in the towns. The urban prevalence rate is 15.9 per cent, while in the countryside it is 9.2 per cent.

9.8 per cent of women and 7.2 per cent of men who had never completed primary education are HIV-positive. But for those with secondary or higher education, the figures are 15 per cent for women and 10.1 per cent for men. In the poorest wealth quintile, only six per cent are HIV-positive. In the richest quintile, the figure reaches 17.4 per cent.

The Forum was organised by the media group SOICO, owners of the television station STV, and the daily paper "O Pais", and was financed by the US embassy.

Plans to reduce illiteracy to 30 per cent

The Mozambican government has said it is committed to reducing the illiteracy rate from the current estimated rate of 48.1 per cent to 30 per cent by 2015, by stepping up its literacy and adult education programmes.

On 22 February the Council of Ministers (Cabinet) approved the content of its Second Literacy and Adult Education Strategy, which envisages making a million adults literate per year.

Deputy Education Minister Augusto Jone told reporters "this is a challenge, but there is no activity without challenges". He did not reveal how much the implementation of the strategy will cost.

Jone was confident that the target can be reached. He pointed out that, when the First Literacy and Adult Education Strategy was approved, in 2005, the illiteracy rate was 60.5 per cent. Between 2005 and 2010, the rate was cut to 48.1 per cent.

"The objectives of the first strategy were met in full", said Jone, "and so the government thought it appropriate to debate in Cabinet a second strategy". This would continue with the actions envisaged in the first strategy, and "will continue to involve civil society and our cooperation partners".

There is a long history of literacy campaigns in Mozambique. When the country won its independence in 1975 the illiteracy rate was estimated at 93 per cent. Three mass literacy campaigns were launched, in 1978, 1979 and 1980, the cumulative effect of which was to reduce the illiteracy rate to 72 per cent.

But this momentum was interrupted by war, which saw education and health activities deliberately targeted by the apartheid-sponsored rebels. Only after the end of the war in 1992 was it possible to design new literacy programmes.

The 2007 population census gave a snapshot of illiteracy. It found that, of the population aged five and above, 7.29 million knew how to read and write, while 8.64 million were illiterate. A further 299,000 said they were only able to read, not write, while 151,000 did not answer the question. So the illiteracy rate at the date of the census, August 2007, among people of primary school age and above, was 52.7 per cent.

But illiteracy is heavily structured by gender, age and the rural/urban divide. In short, most urban men can read and write, and among those in their early teens (who will have had a fairly complete primary education) this becomes an overwhelming majority. But the great majority of rural women remain illiterate. Among older rural women, illiteracy is almost universal.

The census found only 16,030 women aged 60 and above who were literate, and 351,718 who were illiterate. So the illiteracy rate among older rural women was 95.6 per cent in 2007.

Maputo water expansion 60 per cent complete

The project to expand the water supply in Maputo and Matola and the neighbouring district of Boane is at an advanced stage, and could be concluded by the end of this year, according to Pedro Paulino, managing director of the Mozambican government's Water Supply Investment and Assets Fund (FIPAG).

Speaking to reporters in Boane on 14 February, Paulino said the work, which began in early 2010, is now 60 per cent complete, and some people who had never had access to safe water before are now benefiting from it.

The project, budgeted at €95 million ($128 million), seeks to increase the production and transport of treated water from the Umbeluzi river, reduce water losses, and rehabilitate and expend the water distribution network, including the construction of new distribution centres.

The project includes expanding the scope of small private water suppliers who sell water from wells to people living in parts of Maputo and Matola not yet reached by the FIPAG network.

Paulino said that, by the end of this year, the percentage of people living in Maputo, Matola and Boane with access to safe drinking water should rise from the current 40 per cent to 73 per cent. In absolute terms, that means that the number of people with access to clean water will rise from 670,000 to 1.5 million.

Consumers will also enjoy water supply 24 hours a day, rather than the current 12 hours.

Before the start of the project, half of all the treated water distributed in Maputo, Matola and Boane was lost in leaks. FIPAG hopes that the project will reduce the level of losses to 25 per cent. FIPAG also intends to increase water storage capacity in the three areas from 144,000 to 240,000 cubic metres.

Of the €95 million invested in the project, 13.8 per cent comes from the Mozambican state budget. The rest is provided by the European Investment Bank (EIB), the European Union, the French Development Agency, and the Dutch government.

Netherlands invests €27 million in water sector

The Dutch government invested over €27 million (about $37 million) in the Mozambican water sector during 2010, according to the Dutch embassy. In the context of their long-standing partnership, Mozambique and the Netherlands now want to explore new forms of cooperation based on public-private partnerships.

To this end the Dutch embassy organised a seminar in Maputo on 24 February attended by government and municipal representatives, and 50 specialists and managers from the water sector.

The purpose of the meeting was to make a "market assessment" of the water sector in Mozambique and Holland, to analyse the water policies currently in force, and to look at the challenges facing the sector.

The participants, the embassy said, discussed water supply and sanitation, the management of river basins (including the navigability of rivers), coastal protection and land reclamation, and agriculture and irrigation.

It concluded that the specific problems of the water sector cannot be approached one by one, and what is required are "systemic solutions".

ENI/GALP to drill for oil in July

The Mozambican government's National Petroleum Institute (INP) on 24 February confirmed that a consortium formed by the Italian oil company ENI and the Portuguese company GALP will shortly drill for oil in very deep waters in the Rovuma basin, off the coast of the northern province of Cabo Delgado.

Isabel Chivambe, the INP's director for projects and development, told reporters that the consortium intends to drill two exploratory wells. The work will start in July.

GALP has already stated that the Rovuma Basin has a high potential for oil discoveries, while the American company Anadarko has even compared the oil potential of the Rovuma Basin with that of the Gulf of Mexico

Chivambe noted that ENI and GALP will be drilling alongside a block where Anadarko recently discovered large deposits of natural gas. "So this is considered an area with great potential for the occurrence of hydrocarbons", she said.

The Rovuma basin block allocated to ENI presents enormous challenges since the water is 2,600 metres deep. The block covers an area of 17,646 square kilometres, and ENI's exploration rights last until February 2015.

No buyers for Mossurize wheat

Farmers in Mossurize district, in the central province of Manica, have produced wheat as requested by the government – but nobody has come to buy it from them.

According to a report in the Beira daily paper "Diario de Mocambique", last year Mossurize produced 900 tonnes of wheat, as part of the government's drive to step up local production of this grain and reduce imports. But the baking companies did not send trucks to Mossurize to pick up the peasants' production. To avoid complete loss of the wheat, the Mossurize district authorities took the initiative of training the farmers into how to make wheat flour and bake their own bread.

The district director of economic activities, Francisco Navalha, said this did at least solve the problem of local bread shortages, and ended the import of bread from neighbouring Zimbabwe.

"Today you can see small ovens in the villages where large amounts of bread and cakes are baked", said Navalha. "Bread has now become part of the household income".

As for the current agricultural campaign, Navalha said the farmers hope to harvest some 300,000 tonnes of crops (mostly grains and beans) grown on 278,000 hectares. Since December, rains have been falling regularly, which means that the crops are in a much better condition than at the same time in 2010.

Navalha said the district had received in advance 32 tonnes of improved seeds, which were distributed free of charge to peasant farmers, with the technical assistance of rural extensionists.

"So far we haven't had any pests", he said, unlike last year, when insects destroyed much of what was sown.

He pointed out that the soils in Mossurize were favourable for producing wheat and many other crops. The district's livestock potential has led to the use of animal traction, with peasants using about 16,000 head of oxen to pull their ploughs.

Mixing biofuels with fossil fuels to become compulsory

This year it will become compulsory for fuel companies in Mozambique to mix biofuels (ethanol and bio-diesel) into the petrol and diesel they sell to their clients. According to Energy Minister Salvador Namburete regulations on the mixture, establishing percentages and deadlines, have been deposited with the secretariat of the Council of Ministers (Cabinet), and are expected to be approved shortly.

Namburete made this announcement in Maputo on 25 February at the ceremony launching a viability study on the project for Sustainable Development of Bioenergy in Mozambique.

With the new regulations, he added, the government intends to stimulate the production of biofuels. "We want to create a market, to show investors that a market exists", he said. "The mixture of biofuels with fossil fuels will be compulsory from a certain moment and is intended to induce production. The regulations are a way of stimulating investment in the market".

Speaking at the ceremony, the under-secretary general for energy and high technology in the Brazilian Foreign Ministry, Andre Amado, said that in Brazil, one of the largest biofuel producers in the world, all petrol sold must be 25 per cent ethanol, and all diesel is five per cent biodiesel.

Mozambique will be the first country to benefit from a project for the Sustainable Development of Bioenergy, resulting from a partnership between the Brazilian government and the European Union.

However, both Brazil and the EU are calling for a prudent approach to developing biofuels, warning that such production must be sustainable and must respect the environment.

Hence the need for a viability study, which will be undertaken by the Brazilian Getulio Vargas Foundation, together with Mozambican technical staff. The study is intended to ensure alignment of the new programme with the strategies and policies already defined by the Mozambican government, and to create national capacity for the sustainability of the initiative.

The study has financial support to the tune of $800,000 provided by Vale-Mozambique, the Brazilian company developing an enormous open cast coal mine in the western province of Tete. Work on the study will begin in March.

Several biofuel initiatives are already under way in Mozambique. For example, the publicly owned fuel company Petromoc has set up ECOMOZ (Renewable Alternative Energy). Since 2007, the ECOMOZ processing unit has produced over a million litres of biodiesel, based on coconut oil.

Marrupa district joins national electricity grid

Mozambique's publicly owned electricity company, EDM, on 21 February announced that it successfully connected Marrupa district, in the northernmost province of Niassa, to the national grid.

This was the fifth Niassa district to be electrified in the past five months, following Sanga (in October), Maua and Mecanhelas (in December), and Metarica (in January),

In those districts work is now under way to electrify 18 localities through which the transmission lines pass, to provide about 3,240 installations with electricity.

The southern Niassa line, from the city of Cuamba to Insaca, capital of Mecanhelas district, with a branch to Entre-Lagos on the Malawian border has been activated, EDM announced, and power will flow to the beneficiaries as soon as they have signed contracts with EDM.

The electrification of these five districts is part of a project budgeted at $12 million, and financed by the government of Sweden.

Mozambique and Portugal to produce rolling stock

The Mozambican and Portuguese governments plan to set up a company to produce railway locomotives and wagons to be used to transport coal mined in the western province of Tete,

The two governments are expected to sign a protocol covering rail transport, which will then lead to the establishment of the new company.

Transport Minister Paulo Zucula said on 14 February that Mozambique will need at least 600 wagons in the next five years to move coal from Tete, down the Sena railway line, to the port of Beira.

On 11 February Zucula held a meeting in Maputo with his Portuguese counterpart, Antonio Mendonca, with the aim of establishing partnerships between the two states. At the end of his meeting with Mendonca, Zucula pointed out that countries such as Botswana, Zimbabwe and Swaziland will also need new rail wagons in the coming years,

"This is a business opportunity that is opening", said Zucula. "Currently South Africa is the only country in the region which has the capacity to assemble this type of material".

The mining companies are importing their own rolling stock. The two companies that expect to start exporting coal later this year, Vale of Brazil and Riversdale of Australia, have both ordered their own locomotives and wagons.

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