



for the best websites

Time to kiss reconciliation goodbye - by Claudia & Dirk Haarmann

10 September 2010

The sirens go off as the empty bus next to us races through the Matola tollgate in Maputo/Mozambique. We quickly follow. Nobody is there to listen to this warning signal, and if somebody was there he could not care less.

Reverend Mabasso flashes the hazards on his bakkie in front of us and we respond. We understand this sign of relief. We have made it through the desolate city just passing the remains of three days of street clashes between the people and the police.

Less than 10 kilometres to go, then we will have left the two-million people capital of Mozambique behind us. Then the children will be able to pack away the sleeping bags which they are holding on their knees to protect them against potential attacks or stray bullets.

It is Friday, 3rd September 2010, 05h45 and the last minutes of a five-day visit to the Lutheran Church in Mozambique.

We have spent the last three days locked in a flat in the centre of a city halted to a standstill through protests against food price rises of about 30 percent.

The protests turned violent. It started on 1st September, when the food price rise on bread, rice and other basic commodities took effect. The taxi drivers had announced the strike well in advance – the government had underestimated the impact or simply did not care.

On this Wednesday morning the city's air is thick with smoke from burning tyres and people protesting on the streets shouting that they are hungry.

When we left the hotel, we were warned to watch out. By the time we arrived at Reverend Mabasso's place just a few streets away, it had become clear that there was no way out or into the city any more. The slums surrounding the capital were all joining in the strike.

Reverend Mabasso said, "no problem you can stay here so long – the president will speak to the nation, call for dialogue and reduce the prices again", like two years ago when they found themselves in a similar situation.

"No problem" the president will have to understand that the people simply cannot afford the daily bread any more.

But the day passes, and only gun shots break the silence of the otherwise unusually quiet city centre. Reports about six people being killed are screened on the private TV station amongst pictures of burning tyres, protesters attacking cars or passers-by with stones.

On the first day of the deadly riots, however, the national TV broadcasts soaps, no news. Only in the evening, finally, the President speaks to the media and we can see the growing shock and disbelief on the faces of the people we are sharing the refuge of the church flat with.

The President condemns the violence, appealing to the people to find the agitators behind the strike. He is adamant the police will deal with them and the prices will stay high as they are, no reduction.

Shock and disbelief as everybody knows that these are not "some agitators", but the people, who do not have any resources to buy food with. The next day's emergency cabinet meeting has the same message, the police will take care. And they do.

There are reports that they used up all rubber bullets and from now on shoot with live ammunition. The police deny this vehemently. But a child killed through a stray bullet is brutal witness to the truth. The child had adhered to government's advice to stay inside the house – rather shack – but was nevertheless killed by a bullet sprayed into the air by desperate police.

The death toll has risen to 11 or 12 – nobody is sure. At that stage, this is surprisingly no news for most of the international media – people in Namibia or Germany only hear about this when searching the Internet.

Friday, 3rd September, 3pm, we left a chaotic Maputo behind, safely crossed the border and are stopped by a traffic policeman in South Africa. He asks for the driver's licence and where we are coming from. We tell him about our

experience in Maputo and in all honesty he says: "But now you are in South Africa, here you are safe." "Although", he adds, "we also strike, but we do not fight."

The irony of his sentence occurs to all of us in a split second since South Africa is the country with the highest crime rate in the world and one of the highest number of violent murders and rape cases.

We joke with the policeman about that and are wondering how the people in Mozambique are doing.

But what do we learn from this? The capital of a Southern African country is shut down by violent protest from one day to the other by the masses, who cannot take it any longer.

Our development talks of the past days spring to our mind: A development expert had explained in detail to us how he through education wants to create sustainable livelihoods. The communities have to go through a three-year training course, to graduate in this course of business principles and how to manage a bee project or a tree plantation.

Some fail, some will make it. "Then", the development expert says, "we can talk on eye-level and provide them with starting capital". The development expert himself admits to have some doubts about the effectiveness, he cannot quantify the success yet.

He spent the past two-and-a-half years to 'turn around' the thinking of his local staff, to teach the communities and in seven months his contract ends and he will leave again.

Change of scene: the Deputy Minister of Finance in Namibia just a few weeks ago gave a public lecture in which he praised his government's developmental gains for over an hour without even mentioning the increase in unemployment to now over 51%.

He ends his talk with a single cynical remark against a poverty alleviation and redistributive strategy in the form of a minimum income (Basic Income Grant), quoting the by now so famous saying that you need 'to teach people how to fish and not to give them fish'. "And BIG is a fish!", he exclaims.

One might ask, whether the prospect of eating fish was so bad especially for the about one third of the Namibian children who are, according to UNDP, malnourished.

Moreover, since Namibia – like Mozambique – ought to be a fish-rich country, if it was not overfished by industrialised trawlers from the north.

It is obvious, and everybody knows it – we are just too afraid to let go of our ideology, supposedly the only ideology left: The market-driven economy, capitalism – or what you want to call it – creates and perpetuates inequality to such an extent which leaves some with nothing to work or simply to feed their families with, while a few indulge in absolute luxury.

There is a strong belief of justification of those 'who made it' and that the world fortunately or unfortunately has to be like that. We still believe according to good Calvinist ideology that we have worked for our wealth and therefore deserve it. And the reverse is just regarded as truth as well: In the end, the poor have just not worked hard enough to get out of their poverty.

When the Namibian Minister orders his next Mozambican king prawn, he will not even come to realise that the people do know very well how to fish.

In this ideology there is room for charity, some well-intended but ineffective projects and start-up capital for so-called income-generating activities – but not for redistribution and changing the structure of the economy to enable real participation. The analysis of the problem, which is ultimately dependency theory, where the wealth of poor countries is extracted by the rich countries through a system of economic chains and a petite bourgeoisie enforcing it, is surprisingly common knowledge and many would agree with it. But there is complacency when it comes to doing something about it.

The remedy is simple and obvious, only through a radical change in income, yes, that means giving to people resources they otherwise do not have, will opportunities and life for the masses be created.

While the riots in Maputo continued, the General Secretary of the Council of Churches in Mozambique went on air and argued that as Christians none of us must resort to violence. Understandably so. But just as true is the appeal of Desmond Tutu who said after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa: "Watch it. You can kiss reconciliation and forgiveness goodbye, unless the gap between the rich and the poor – the haves and the have-nots – is narrowed, and narrowed quickly and dramatically."

If we do not stop to justify, why the poor are so poor ostensibly out of their own doing (if they only were to produce something they can sell, and then save...). If we do not stop arguing what else needs to happen before we redistribute, if we do not start to give income and security instead of obligations to those who have nothing, we should take the time, watch it and kiss reconciliation goodbye. Best done with a good fish from Mozambique and an ice-cold Chardonnay to sedate our hearts and minds!

- Claudia and Dirk Haarmann are Pastors and hold a PhD in Social Development. They are the Directors of the Theological Institute for Advocacy and Research in Africa (TARA).

[Back to Top](#)