

Arms Depot Explosion in Mozambique

Monday, 26 March 2007

Last Updated Thursday, 05 April 2007

MAPUTO, Mozambique – Anxious crowds gathered at the city's hospital Friday as doctors and nurses struggled to keep up with a stream of patients wounded when a weapons depot exploded in a densely populated neighborhood, sparking a cascade of rockets and ammunition.

Health Minister Ivo Garrido said Friday that 93 people were killed in Thursday's explosion, although more recent coverage has revised those estimates to over 100. The series of blasts at a Soviet-era arms depot shattered windows, and sent rockets and missiles raining down on residential neighbourhoods, leaving over 500 injured. Download Movie Questions remain over the cause of the explosion. The government has blamed the explosion on high temperatures but the opposition has accused the army of "negligence" in the storage of vast quantities of obsolete weaponry and South African military experts have also expressed scepticism over the heat theory.

The government declared three days of national mourning and said flags will be flown at half staff. The defense ministry said high temperatures in recent months were the most likely cause of Thursday's explosion. The temperature Thursday was 93 degrees. The searing heat was blamed for a smaller explosion at the depot in January when three people were injured. The Interior Ministry ordered police and firefighters to help the military destroy all remaining ammunition at the badly maintained depot, which was built by the Soviet Union in 1984 and stocked with obsolete Soviet-made weapons. The ministry also ordered police reinforcements to stop looters from ransacking houses abandoned by their owners because of the inferno. Victims were packed into Maputo's main hospital. Overwhelmed doctors and nurses struggled to cope with the influx of patients. Authorities said many children had been separated from their parents in the chaos and panic. “The government should remove the arsenal and investigate the causes of the explosion because it is not the first time,” said Afonso Dhlakama, leader of the former rebel movement. “War materials should not be kept where there are people living,” he said.

Mozambique is still recovering from the legacy of Portuguese colonial rule and the civil war which followed. It has been battered by natural disasters this year affecting more than 500,000 people and prompting the United Nations to launch an emergency appeal for \$18 million.

This video was recorded by Jon Durand, a CUSO cooperant in Mozambique.