

The Unlikely Effects of War

by Caitlyn Bradburn

I was teaching in Mozambique, Africa, when the war in Iraq began on March 20, 2003. My students became very preoccupied with what was happening. It may be hard to imagine how war waged between the United States and Iraq could possibly affect rural vocational-school students in Mozambique. But it did, in more ways than might be imagined.

The campus is a recipient of and relies heavily upon food from the World Food Program. The program provides all of the cooking oil, corn, rice, and staples needed. Every meal, every day, for over 130 boarding school students and their teachers contains either rice or massa (made from corn flour). Additionally, we just recently started a food distribution program for those who care for orphans.

Just after the bombing of Iraq began our school received a letter from the World Food Program warning that donations of food worldwide, including ours, were in jeopardy. If the United Nations, which oversees the World Food Program, needs to cut its budget—perhaps because the United States won't pay its dues, or perhaps to reroute UN resources to refugee camps or peacekeeping troops—food programs, such as ours, would be one of the first to be eliminated. Without the food donations there is no feasible way for the school to feed its students.

President Joaquim Chissano of Mozambique publicly declared his opposition to the war, particularly the intensity and technological level at which it was waged. His reasons were related directly to his own country. Even ten years after the end of war in Mozambique the people there are still suffering. This war was fought with low-level technology, including machetes and landmines produced for as little as five dollars each. Mozambique is still rebuilding its infrastructure: relaying roads, reconstructing buildings, trying to repair water systems. For ten years Mozambique had fought

its war. Imagine how long it could take Iraq to recover from a war fought much more strategically and with weapons that generate much greater destruction than could a single machete.

I wonder about the recovery of a country such as Iraq. There have been allegations in the past—in the Congo and throughout Central America for example—that the United States comes up with grand schemes to “develop a country,” schemes that it knows will fail miserably. The United States loans massive amounts of money to the targeted country to fund such projects, which the developing country must pay back, debts and all! In Mozambique, thanks to all of the “rebuilding” after the war, more is spent on debt repayment than on education or health projects. This is in a country where only about 40 percent of the population can read and only 12 percent of the rural population has access to clean drinking water. Despite all of the need, more money is spent to repay the debts. This seems unconscionable.

My students remember the war here and its personal impact. For example, one of my colleagues, Paulino, has a rather odd tattoo on his forearm. I'd noticed that many people here have tattoos in the same spot so I asked him about it. He explained that entire extended families would be tattooed with the same tattoo. That way, if family members became separated during the war, a family member died, or a misplaced child were found, the extended family could easily be identified. Paulino received his tattoo at the age of six. Now, fifteen years later, he bears a constant and perpetual reminder of the war's horrors on his forearm.

One of my students asked for my assistance in preparing his resume. Now eighteen years old, he wrote on his resume that he was kidnapped at the age of five by RENAMO, the rebel group, and was kidnapped two years later from RENAMO by FRELIMO, the current

government group. He was forced to fight at the age of five by both. How can he ever forget?

One of my friends in Mozambique, Micheque, is now twenty-one years old and a teacher at a primary school. When I first arrived in the country I enjoyed his company because, as I struggled with my Portuguese, he would talk and talk and I would listen. One day he told me all about what he did and saw during the war. He has vivid memories of his father throwing him and his siblings out the window to run into the bush. His father “disappeared” for years and was almost given up for dead. But one day he came back visibly shaken, significantly thinner, with a long beard, and almost completely silent. As the war progressed Micheque saw a baby plucked from his mother’s back, put into the pilão used to mash corn into flour, and literally pounded to death in front of his mother. He saw children forced to watch, first as their parents’ ears were cut off and second as their parents were forced to eat them.

I think that, for most Americans, war is more a concept than a reality. What do we really *know* about war? About living through a war? About surviving in the aftermath? Even American soldiers, who often gravely suffer physically and mentally because of their service during conflicts, have the opportunity to return home, to leave the physical site of the war behind them. But people in Mozambique and in Iraq don’t have that luxury. They endure the constant reminders of war. In Mozambique there are bombed out,

rusted out train cars on the side of the road and no resources to remove them. There is no running water in Beira, the second largest city in the country, since during the war concrete was poured down all of the pipelines. There are bullet holes in the sides of schools and hospitals. The landmines, which are found and marked in every village, can’t be removed because there is no money for such an expensive project.

My students have asked why the United States proceeded to wage war on Iraq without the approval of the United Nations, without the support of the general world population, and without substantial, concrete reasons for war. What could I tell them? That the United States is forever prioritizing profits, oil, diamonds, and gold above people? Could I admit that *those* are the morals of my country? How could I explain that, even though the United States has so much—an unimaginable amount of resources and wealth—it still hungers for more?

Mozambique is just one of many poor countries that suffer at the hands of more powerful, rich countries. Too often it is easy to forget that war anywhere affects people everywhere; that profit for one country is often at the expense of another country. Too many people sit in comfort while others, perhaps in far-off lands, suffer. ☪

Caitlyn Bradburn, age twenty-four, received an honorable mention for this essay in the 2004 *Humanist Essay Contest*.

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