



When the floods hit Mozambique, Carolina Chiboure climbed up a tree to stay alive. But it was when she gave birth in the branches and was eventually airlifted to safety that the world began to take notice of the scale of the natural disaster. As public donations snowball, Carolina and her baby are now their country's most valuable export, catapulted from a life of extreme poverty into a world of media celebrity and ambassadorial limos



Report by Philip Watson



Baby Rosita is airlifted to safety from the tree in which she was born. *Opposite*, Rosita with her mother, Carolina Chibure, in hospital two days after the rescue

The Rainforest Cafe in the Tysons Corner shopping mall just outside Washington DC is trumpeted as 'a wild place to shop and eat'. As well as fake foliage, faux rocks, plastic fruit and wooden parrots, every 22 minutes the Disney theme restaurant darkens and loud rumbles of thunder and cracks of lightning boom out from the cafe's PA.

With 'rainwater' continually falling into flowerbeds which tumble out misty dry ice, the overall effect approaches that of a heavy tropical storm.

While children whoop and marvel at the 'lifesize animatronic elephants' which are raising their trunks and flapping their ears, Carolina Chibure sits at a table nervously attempting to comfort her four-and-a-half-month-old baby, Rosita, who has begun to cry. In front of her is a menu – one that she could not read, even if it were written in her native language, Changaná – which features such delicacies as jungle juice smoothies, 'Gorilla in the Mist' banana cheesecakes, and a tenderloin steak called a 'treetop fillet'.

Carolina's confusion is understandable. Earlier this year, during the floods in Mozambique, she became the human face of an otherwise incomprehensible African tragedy. She had clung precariously to the branch of a tree where, after three days without food or water, she gave birth to a baby girl. She was finally rescued by a paramedic who was winched down from a helicopter. Before a dramatic airlift to safety, he had to cut her umbilical cord.

The disaster affected nearly two million people, displaced 500,000 and killed 700, but it was only after Carolina and her baby's story was broadcast around the world that political and relief-effort agendas began to change. Not only did she seem to possess a symbolic power, but the images of the rescue were gruesomely telegenic. They were poignant pictures of a newborn child in the arms of her mother who, despite her extreme circumstances, seemed to possess a certain compelling composure and charm.

Public donations increased dramatically. Although there had been some reporting of the floods in the weeks before, contributions to charity appeals had been minimal; this was, after all, just another natural disaster in a largely unknown part of Africa. After Carolina and Rosita became famous, however, money donated to the UK appeal organised by the coordinating Disasters Emergency Committee reached a staggering £22 million, a figure only surpassed by the Rwanda and Kosovo appeals.

It is this humanitarian, marketing and political power, unwitting as it may be, that has brought Carolina to Washington DC. In a two-week promotional visit organised by the Mozambique embassy in the capital, Carolina and her baby are being used to raise awareness of the scale of the relief and redevelopment work still needed in Mozambique, and to generate funds for both her family and country.

'The important thing is not just that baby Rosita represents more than 80,000 children under five affected by the floods, but that together they represent all the victims and the suffering,' Marcos Namashulua, Mozambique's ambassador to the United States, told me. 'Their story is also unique and it really put our country on the map. Carolina has been a great ambassador – perhaps even a better ambassador than myself – because she has turned the world's eyes and ears towards Mozambique.'

According to Gilbert Davidson, president of Mozambique International, 'The main reason for bringing the mother and baby to the US was to remind people that they are not the only victims of the floods in Mozambique who need food, clothing, medical assistance and proper housing.' The non-profit making organisation was approached by the embassy to meet the cost of flying Carolina, Rosita and an interpreter to America, and has shipped 100,000 items of food, water,

blankets and clothing to Mozambique. It has also arranged several public and private events for Carolina, including this 'day off' visit to the Rainforest Cafe.

A couple of days after her Rainforest experience I meet Carolina in her de luxe suite in the new St Gregory Luxury Hotel in downtown Washington. The room, which has been given to her free-of-charge for the duration of her stay, normally costs £300 per night. The average per capita annual income in Mozambique is around £130.

Around her are the facilities of a modern five-star hotel bedroom: high-speed internet connection points, web television, dual-line telephones, a CD player and clock/radio. In the kitchen area is a microwave, coffee-maker and



A peasant farmer from one of the world's poorest countries, Carolina's experience in America could not represent a greater global contrast; a little like travelling from the Middle Ages to the 21st century

Flood victims take to the roofs to escape the rising waters of the Limpopo river

dishwasher. Apart from the cooker, which her interpreter, Isabel, has explained how to use so that Carolina can heat up milk for the baby, she cannot operate any of them.

I begin to appreciate her intense bewilderment. This is a far cry from Carolina Chibure's life in Mozambique. A 24-year-old peasant farmer from one of the poorest countries in the world, her experience in America could not represent a greater global contrast; it is a little like travelling from the Middle Ages to the 21st century.

Yet, apart from when she cradles and feeds Rosita, and slides her new flip-flops off and on her feet, she is perfectly still and contained. Her hair is braided and pulled back tightly over her head, a style which accentuates her fine features and cheeky smile. She is wearing a new green dress; the padded shoulders stand out proudly from her shoulders.

'I was born the eighth of 10 children and during my childhood I mostly worked in the fields growing maize to eat,' says Carolina, through her interpreter. Like 70 per cent of the children in Mozambique, Carolina did not attend school. 'I also worked part-time as a nanny looking after the children of mothers in the village.'

At the age of 18 she went to live with an aunt in a suburb of Maputo, where she hoped to get more regular work. Soon afterwards she met Salvador Mubuiango, six years her elder,

and she became pregnant. They were not – and are not now – married. Salvador took Carolina to live with him and his family in Mondiale, a village in the low flood plains of the Limpopo river, 120 miles to the north. It was here, in the hospital in nearby Chibuto, that Carolina gave birth to a girl, Celina, now aged four, and later a boy, Benedito, two. In June last year she became pregnant with their third child.

The family lived in a straw hut with no electricity, no water. Between caring for her children, she worked in the fields with Salvador's family. During the past two years Salvador had returned to Maputo to work as a porter. Renting a simple four-wheel trolley, he would transport, using manpower alone, firewood and other materials between houses and districts. Every couple of months he would return to Mondiale with soap, buckets, plates, food and any money he had saved. 'During a good week he might make up to 200,000 meticaís [£8],' says Carolina. 'When demand was low it would be as little as 50,000 [£2].'

It is understandable, considering Carolina's lack of education and the enormous cultural differences, that she is unable to answer questions that require her to describe the emotional impact of all she has experienced. When it comes to telling the story of what happened to her during the floods, however, she is much more forthcoming.

'It was around 3pm on a Sunday, and I was outside our hut preparing dinner with my mother-in-law on an open fire, when the waters came so suddenly that I could see some huts in the village already being washed away,' she says. 'All we had time to do was grab a few clothes and blankets and head to the trees. I bound Benedito to my back in a *capelana* [a long strip of printed cotton traditionally used as a wrap or swaddling cloth] and strapped him to my back, and I put my daughter Celina on my shoulders. And then, as best I could, I ran.'

The family found a tall *mafireira* tree. Carolina first handed up her children and then her brothers-in-law helped her, heavily pregnant, to climb to the highest branches. Salvador's father, a *mutilado* who, following injuries sustained fighting in Mozambique's long civil war, had had a leg amputated above the knee and walked on crutches, was also helped up the tree. By the time everyone had climbed to safety, the waters had reached the roof of their house.

Over the next hours the floodwaters in some parts of the Limpopo valley rose by more than 26 feet. The river, normally only a few hundred yards wide, was reported to be 10 miles across in some places.

'There were around 15 people including neighbours and friends in our tree, but many more in trees nearby,' says Carolina. 'Our tree was very big, so luckily there was room for all of us and everyone helped each other to move around. I placed a blanket on the branch to get as comfortable as I could. My mother-in-law looked after Celina and I watched Benedito.'



From left, Carolina is winched into the helicopter, shortly after giving birth in a tree; Carolina and baby Rosita, back on dry land; four months on, Carolina shops for baby clothes in Washington DC. Below, Carolina, Rosita and interpreter Isabel arrive in Washington

With no time to gather food, and with the swirling, muddy waters below them contaminated by dead cattle and other animals, there was little else Carolina could do other than hold on. As night fell and the temperature dropped, their situation became a little more bearable, yet a new danger emerged. 'We realised that we couldn't risk sleeping in case any of us fell into the waters. So each day, hour and minute, even though we were all very scared, we kept calling each other's names, and talking to each other, and shouting words of encouragement. If someone noticed another had fallen asleep, that person was shaken awake,' she laughs.

During the second night, however, Salvador's grandmother, who had been holding on to a lower branch because she could climb no higher, fell, exhausted, into the water and was swept away. 'There was no moon and it was very dark and all I heard was the sound of her falling, then a splash, and she was gone.'

In the daytime, with no shade and temperatures rising above 30°C, conditions were harsh. The children became hungry. 'We thought only of surviving, not of eating or drinking, to the point that we didn't feel hungry, but both of my children were crying and my two-year-old son could not keep still. In trying to move him my blanket came free and fell into the water. It was terrifying because I thought Benedito was going to fall with it.'

Carolina suffered from pre-contraction pains during the second night but they passed. During the third day, however, the pains became more severe and Salvador's father was asked to look after the boy. Her contractions started at 3am on the third night during which her mother-in-law moved to Carolina's branch to make her as comfortable as possible. She was in labour over the next hours, as dawn broke and the morning sun beat down on her.

'I know it is painful usually, but I wouldn't say it was more painful than when I had my two previous children in hospital,' she says, matter-of-factly. It is even possible that she finds her story unremarkable – in Mozambique rural women often give birth at home. 'The only difference was that I was feeling dizzy and very, very weak.'

At 11am, just as Carolina was struggling to hold on to the branches of the tree in order to find the right position to deliver the baby, helicopters finally arrived to rescue the villagers. Carefully, one by one, the people in Carolina's tree were winched to safety; Salvador's father passed Celina and Benedito into the arms of a South African soldier as Carolina looked on. The soldier came back for Carolina, but her mother-in-law refused to allow her to be taken. It was too dangerous to move her, and she stayed with Carolina as the helicopter flew her family to safe ground near Chibuto.

Ten minutes later Carolina gave birth to a baby girl and the child was immediately wrapped in a *capelana* and kept warm. The placenta had also been delivered and the umbilical cord was attached. 'My mother-in-law was holding the baby so carefully and she kept telling me that the

'Both my children were crying and my two-year-old son could not keep still. In trying to move him my blanket fell into the water. It was terrifying because I thought my son was going to fall with it'

helicopter would return soon and we would all be rescued.'

Forty minutes later – although Carolina is, understandably, a little uncertain of precise timings – the helicopter returned. Godfrey Nengovhela, a South African army paramedic, was winched down to the tree, where he cut the umbilical cord and tied it with a clip. A few minutes later Rosita, then Carolina, and finally the mother-in-law were winched into the helicopter and flown to the hospital in Chibuto. The baby weighed just 5lb 12oz, and was named Rosita after Carolina's mother-in-law. All had survived.

Since she became a representative in the US, some have expressed concern that Carolina might return to Mozambique too Westernised – she was given a little make-up to wear for her first press conferences in Washington and during her stay her clothes became less and less African. 'She is being used too much and too far,' one aid worker in Mozambique told me. It is true that day by day Carolina begins to look more at home in Western society. She, however, regards her fame more as a blessing than a curse.

Carolina is aware that her special treatment might lead to resentment

within Mozambique, and that some believe she is planning to return with her family to live in the US. 'I know my luck has changed and that I have gained something while others have not, so naturally there will be some jealousy,' she says. 'But what I have in my mind is Mozambique, and living in Mozambique, because it is where my family is and I want to be with them.'

Mostly her experience since her rescue has been positive. It even led to her being reunited with Salvador and to her meeting her country's president. Called to Maputo after she had spent a week in hospital and some days at an accommodation centre near Chibuto, she was greeted by President Joaquim Chissano as a national hero. Pictures were shown on Mozambique television and friends of Salvador, who was living and working in Benfica on the outskirts of Maputo, recognised Carolina and told him. He did not believe them. Early the next day they brought him a copy of the national paper, *Noticias*; Carolina and his new baby daughter were on the front page. He rushed to the Hotel Santa Cruz, where they were staying. 'Yes, it was very emotional to see him because I hadn't seen him since Christmas and he didn't know if we were still alive,' says Carolina.

There have been other benefits, too.

Although she has returned to live in the harsh conditions of a transit centre in Maputo awaiting resettlement, the Mozambique government has given Carolina and her family a house and five hectares of land near Chibuto, to which they will soon move. It has also guaranteed an education for Rosita and her siblings and set up a fund that will provide Rosita with a university education, either in Mozambique or the US, where she has already been offered scholarships.

With the money raised in the US, Carolina will be able to buy a cooker, fridge and furniture for the house, as well as a tractor. She also plans to get an education herself, but she has no plans for more children. 'I am not like other women – before their child reaches the age of one they are already expecting another,' she says.

If Carolina was seen initially as a symbol of the plight of her country, she is slowly becoming atypical. Yet her story continues to contain a strong alchemic power. As curious confluences of flood victim and media celebrity, Carolina and Rosita are a potent force for change that many have sought to exploit – primarily, of course, the Mozambique government.

'Somebody's disaster may be another person's opportunity,' Ambassador

Namashulua tells a private gathering of wealthy and charitable African-Americans who have come to meet the mother and baby. 'We cannot rebuild Carolina and Rosita's house, and rebuild our country, on our own. Mozambique had been one of the fastest growing economies in the world before the flood, and it still has a lot to offer. Small businesses, big businesses – welcome to Mozambique. It's the only place to be.'

The government has even realised that Carolina and Rosita's story itself has a market value. Canadian and South African film companies have already approached the Mozambique authorities to make a docu-drama of Carolina's life. 'It is unlikely we would give anybody again such a deep meeting without a contract,' Leonor Joaquim, counsellor with the Mozambique embassy, tells me after I have finished my final interview with Carolina. What kind of contract, I ask. 'Financial,' she replies.

Carolina and Rosita have also become a political cause celebre. Invited to Capitol Hill by the Congressional Black Caucus, a Democrat lobbying group, they are presented to the media as the embodiment of the West's failure to respond both to disasters such as the floods in Mozambique and to the issue

of debt relief. The caucus is quick to point out that before the floods Mozambique was spending more than £40 million per year on foreign debt payments, a sum greater than it provided for primary healthcare and education provision combined. Not only this, but also damage from the floods has been estimated by the World Bank at £330 million. Mother and baby are now pawns in a much larger political game.

'We have been trying to get the administration to put more pressure on the International Monetary Fund to become more involved with struggling African nations, and to forgive the debt,' says Maryland state senator Gloria Lawlah. 'I think a story like this can only help. There has been an outpouring of love, respect and awe, and that has many far-reaching implications. This is a story that is worth repeating down through the centuries.'

Carolina and Rosita's political power has also been recognised by debt relief campaigning group Jubilee 2000. The London-based global coalition applied to the Mozambique government to take mother and baby to the G8 Summit in Japan, which was taking place while they were in the States. Carolina's schedule proved too

busy, however, and she travelled with Rosita to Detroit at the invitation of local priest, the Rev Wendall Anthony, who had baptised Rosita on a recent visit to Mozambique. They were met at the airport by a stretch limousine and a police escort.

Most intense, though, has been the focus on the future of baby Rosita. Famous from the minute she was born, she is cradled, kissed, protected and praised wherever she goes. She is photographed and showered with gifts of toys and clothes (so many that it takes seven extra suitcases to get them home); in London a Burmese businessman plays Carolina a song he composed for Rosita after hearing about her on the news.

In a country where it is estimated that one in five children dies before the age of five and life expectancy at birth is just 44 years, Rosita has become a precious symbol of the future of Africa.

'This is a tremendous story out of Africa, out of poor Mozambique, out of a country with not much going for it,' says Senator Lawlah. 'But, who knows, maybe this child will grow up to become a great leader for Africa.' Please send donations to: The Disasters Emergency Committee Mozambique Appeal, FREEPOST 26 LON 14182, London W1E 5HS