When Carolina Chibure gave birth while clinging to a tree to escape the rising waters of flood-ravaged Mozambique, she became an overnight celebrity, catapulted from a world of mud huts into one of hotel suites. Seven years on, **Philip Watson** caught up with the mother and her 'miracle baby'. Photographs by **Pieter Hugo**

After the deluge

We are driving along a pot-holed road in southern Mozambique when we reach a small bridge over the Limpopo. As we cross it, I look down at one of Africa's great watercourses, a river that runs for 1,100 miles from its source in South Africa.

No more than 100ft across, the Limpopo lies still, its waters flowing gently through marshlands and reed banks. Around us is a flat yet fertile alluvial plain, a landscape of low grasslands and long horizons broken only by groves of cashew trees and the occasional towering coconut palm.

'Many people and animals came to this bridge during the floods of 2000,' one of our passengers, Carolina Chibure, says. 'The water didn't quite reach the bridge, and hundreds and hundreds of people crammed together to survive. They lived and cooked and slept on the bridge for many days.'

Carolina is in a unique position to describe the floods, in which 700 people died and half a million were displaced, because she is the public face of that disaster. As the waters raged, she clung tenaciously to the branch of a tree where, after three days without food or water, she gave birth to a baby girl. That girl, Rosita, is sitting beside me, drawing in my notebook, on the back seat of the car.

'I WAS CRYING, AND SHOUTING OUT THAT I WAS IN AGONY, THAT I WAS GOING TO DELIVER THE CHILD. I THOUGHT I WAS GOING TO DIE'

Eventually rescued by a South African paramedic who was winched down from a helicopter, Carolina and Rosita became instantly famous as their airlift was captured by a television crew and broadcast around the world. The compelling footage made another incomprehensible tragedy in a largely unknown part of Africa suddenly seem very human. Public donations increased substantially; a staggering £30 million was raised in the UK alone.

Carolina directs us to turn off the road and we head down a long dirt track. Beside us there are dusty red fields of maize and cassava; ahead, a herd of oxen slowly parts to allow us to pass. We see women pounding manioc; children carrying large plastic containers of water on their heads; groups of small, simple mud huts with matted straw roofs. 'During the floods, all the houses on this plain were either washed away or under water,' Carolina says through an interpreter. 'The waters were almost 20ft high in places and only the tallest trees were visible.'

After 15 minutes or so, we stop by the side of the track and are greeted by some relatives of Carolina's common-law husband, Salvador. The welcome is warm, yet guarded. Carolina no longer lives in this area of Bilene-Mundial – since 2000, she has been living in the nearby town of Chibuto, in a brick house built for her and her family by the Mozambique government – and her visits to the village have become less frequent.

'Why do you not come to visit us on foot?' asks one of Salvador's aunts, who leads us along a narrow path through the fields. 'Why do you wait to be brought here by others?' Carolina remains reticent and slightly disconnected; she has perhaps heard such comments before. After a few hundred yards we reach a small enclosure of mud huts, where around 15 members of Salvador's extended family are living. While two elderly women hug Carolina and Rosita, others tease her. Some of the younger boys address her as a 'city girl' who 'doesn't need to visit them now that she has enough food'; others call her a 'mulungo' – in her native tongue, Changana, the word means 'white person'.

'This is Rosita's house,' says Ernesto, one of Salvador's brothers, pointing to the tall mafureira tree where the girl was born. The area is an archetype of subsistence-level African living. There is no electricity or water supply; the little food they can grow in the surrounding fields is cooked on open fires. Everyone – from a girl of six who has a young

Carolina Chibure, 31, with her daughter Rosita, seven, at the foot of the tree in which Rosita was born

baby strapped to her back, to a white-haired man with his arm in a makeshift sling – is dressed in dirty, ragged clothes; nobody is wearing shoes. The elderly women, turning their attention to me, point to their stomachs and make grunting noises. 'I know he can't understand,' they tell Jose, our interpreter, 'but make him realise we are hungry.'

The trip to 'Rosita's house' is revealing because it graphically illustrates how much Carolina's life has changed since 2000. With her new home and regular job – she works as a cleaner at the offices of the local council – she is now, by Mozambique standards, relatively middle class. In contrast to the unkempt appearance of the villagers in Bilene-Mundial, both mother and daughter have their hair carefully braided. Carolina wears a rather formal purple jacket, a smart patterned wraparound skirt and new black pumps; Rosita is dressed in a freshly laundered leopard-design top, neat jeans and white sandals with a bow.

Several in their community have criticised Carolina's family for being 'too westernised'; Rosita and her sister Celina, aged 12, and brother Benedito, 10, have been seen in Osh Kosh trousers and Winnie the Pooh trainers. In Rosita's bedroom, there is a shelf full of *Toy Story* models.

Many of these items were given to Carolina and Rosita during a two-week visit to the United States in 2000 – where I first met her – a bizarre promotional tour organised by the Mozambique embassy in Washington, DC, and paid for by Mozambique International, a local African-American charity. In meetings with politicians, businessmen, church leaders, charity organisers and the media, Carolina and her 'miracle baby' helped to raise awareness of the scale of the relief and redevelopment work still needed in Mozambique, and to generate funds both for the government and her family.

'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 at the time. 'Carolina is a great ambassador... because she has turned the world's eyes and ears towards Mozambique.'

As a result of one random episode, Carolina and Rosita had been catapulted from a life of extreme poverty into a world of luxury hotel suites, ambassadorial limos and sprawling shopping-malls. Unwittingly, they had become a curious conflation of disaster victim and media celebrity. As their country's most valuable assets, they also possessed considerable humanitarian, economic, religious and political power.

Earlier this year, there were again serious floods in Mozambique – mostly around the Zambezi and its tributaries in the central region. Forty-five people were killed, 170,000 were displaced, and thousands of homes and acres of crops were destroyed, yet there was little international coverage of the devastation. It seemed an opportune time, therefore, to revisit Carolina and Rosita, to see if their emotive story still had any residual power, and to discover whether their special treatment and circumstances had been more a blessing than a curse. I had first met Rosita when she was just four months old; now she is seven. What had become of the baby girl who, from the day she was born, was feted as 'a future leader for Africa'?

Carolina Chibure is sitting in a cafe in Chibuto, 130 miles north of the capital Maputo. She is an attractive woman with fine features; occasionally her face

Right baby Rosita is winched to the safety of a South African army helicopter.
Below Carolina and Rosita in hospital the following day

ROSITA'S GREAT-GRANDMOTHER FELL INTO THE RUSHING WATER AND WAS SWEPT AWAY. THEY NEVER RECOVERED HER BODY

flashes with a cheeky smile, yet mostly she is distant and withdrawn. Her replies are often non-committal, and she is reluctant to answer questions that require her to describe the emotional impact of what she has experienced. Jose, our interpreter, explains to me later that it may be inappropriate for her to reveal private matters to a white stranger. It may also be because of her lack of education; like 24 per cent of the children of Mozambique, Carolina never went to school.

She was born 31 years ago (she does not know her exact date of birth) in the town of Tenga, 40 miles north-west of Maputo, near the South African border. Her father worked for the national railway company and moved around a lot; he fathered 15 children by three different women. In a country of 20 million people in which malaria is at near epidemic levels and 16 per cent are estimated to have HIV-Aids, it is perhaps unsurprising that seven of those children subsequently died. In Mozambique, one in six children does not survive past their fifth birthday; the average life expectancy is 42.

When she was Rosita's age, life for Carolina was tough. 'Because there wasn't enough food at home,

I was always being moved around from one relative or family friend to another,' she says. 'I'd work hard in the fields in exchange for food. I don't remember much from my childhood, but the one thing I do know is that I was suffering.'

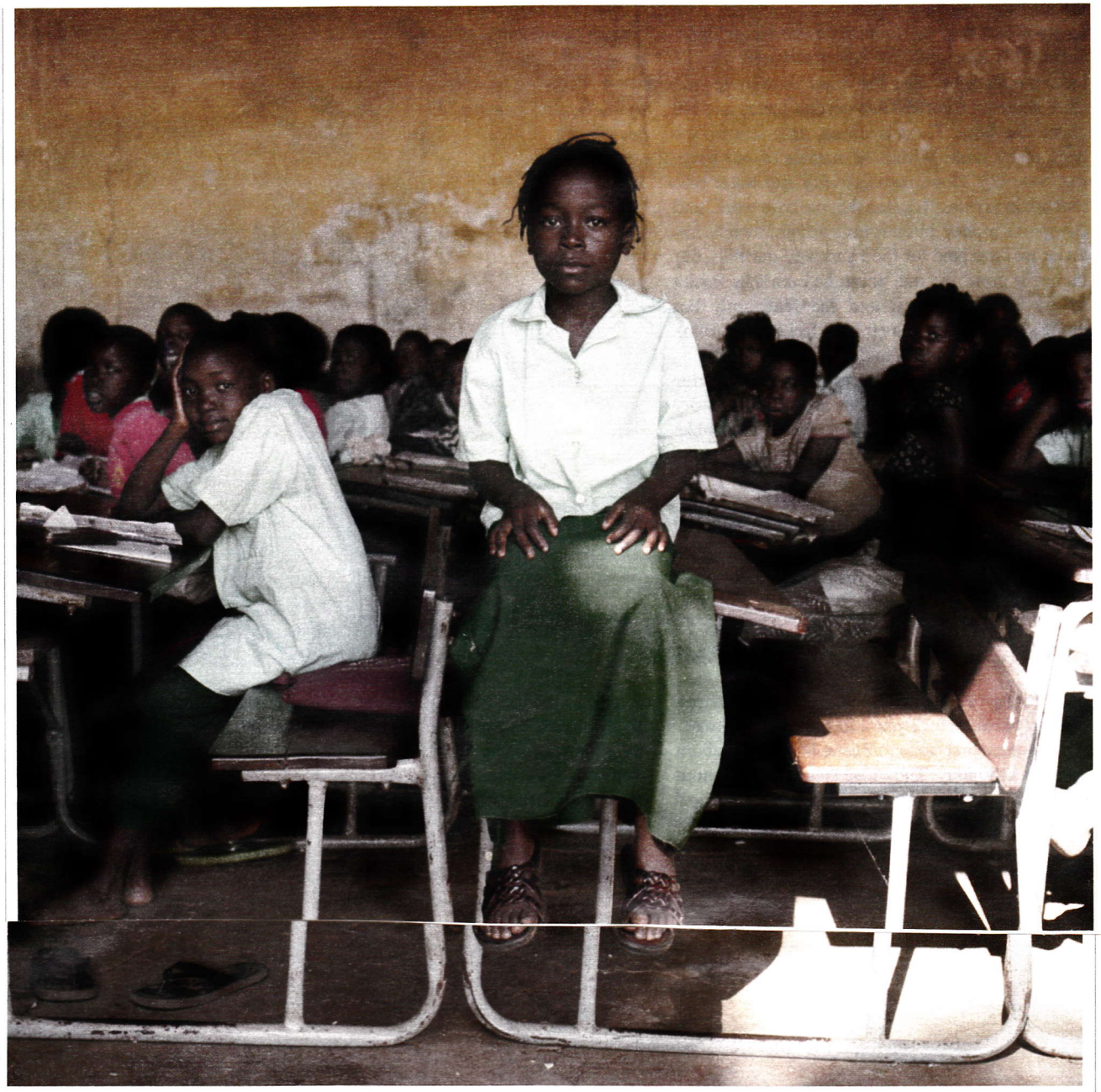
From the age of 13, Carolina lived mostly (and illegally) in South Africa, staying with an aunt and working on farms. Here, aged 18, she met Salvador Mabuiango, six years her elder; shortly afterwards she became pregnant. Salvador took Carolina to live with his family in Bilene-Mundial; Celina was born in the hospital in Chibuto. Three years later she gave birth to Benedito, and in 1999 she became pregnant with their third child. During most of this time, Salvador would leave the family home to seek work elsewhere. Every few months he would return with household items, food, and any money he had saved. When the floods hit the Limpopo valley, he was working as a porter in Maputo.

'All the children I have had, I always had them alone while he was somewhere else,' Carolina says. She doesn't refer to Salvador by name. 'He would come back, impregnate me, and then leave.'

Carolina and Salvador were reunited in Maputo after the floods. She had contracted malaria while in the tree and was treated in hospital in Chibuto, then transferred to a temporary accommodation centre. Soon afterwards, once her worldwide fame became apparent, she was called to the capital by President Joaquim Chissano, put up in a hotel, and treated as a national hero. The media coverage led to Salvador discovering that Carolina and his new daughter were alive, well and in Maputo.

On returning from the US, Carolina and her children were again housed in the transition centre for flood victims in Chibuto. At the end of 2000 they moved to a new, three-bedroom, single-storey

REUTERS, AP



Rosita at her primary school in Chibuto, where she is one of 1,300 pupils

'I WOULD LIKE TO BECOME A DOCTOR AND HELP THE SICK AND GO AND WORK IN MANY COUNTRIES'

brick house built by the government in Bairro Chimundo, a new neighbourhood on the outskirts of the town. It is the only such house in the area; all the others are of a simple reed-and-mud construction, mostly with corrugated-iron roofs. Fully furnished, the house stood on a two-acre plot; four oxen and some goats were provided. The money Carolina brought back from the US paid for security bars to be fitted to the windows and doors.

One of the first things Salvador did was to sell the oxen and goats, without consulting Carolina. 'He does all his business alone, and he always gets into trouble,' she says. 'The authorities tried to recover the oxen and the money, and they even locked him up in jail for a few days, but nothing came of it. None of that money ever came into the house. He didn't even buy so much as a pair of slippers for Rosita.'

The government also set up an account of five million meticias (about £130) for the running costs of the home, but that, too, soon disappeared. In 2002, while Salvador was away looking for work, Carolina went to the bank in Chibuto. To her horror, there was only 30p left in the account: 'He'd already taken the money; I never saw any of it.'

Since 2002 Salvador has mostly been absent from the family home. 'If he gets a job somewhere today, then maybe in a month or two, he leaves it – he never stays in one place,' Carolina says. 'Yet when he comes back home, he just sits there. He only gets up to go and drink, drink, drink.'

It was during a period in 2004 when Salvador was away that Rosita and her brother Benedito became sick with malaria and Carolina had to take them to Chibuto hospital. It soon emerged that Carolina could not afford to pay for any treatment, and that the family – Salvador's mother and father, and two of his brothers, who were also living in the house at the time – were facing extreme poverty. National media attention and government intervention again came to their rescue.

Food rations were sent to the house and a second, more modest mud home built for her parents-in-law. Even though the local authorities accused the family of failing to properly manage the assets they had received on Rosita's behalf, Carolina was given the cleaning job she still works at in the town council. It supplies her with a monthly wage of just over £30.

Although Carolina admits that she occasionally receives money from the politicians, religious groups and journalists who visit her, there is very little other money coming into the house and times remain tough. While pleased that her three children are attending school – over the past three years she herself has been going to literacy classes – she finds it difficult to meet the costs of uniforms and books. She cannot afford to travel to work by private minibus; mostly she walks a distance of five miles there and back. 'Those who are far away from us think we are still rich, but we know we are really poor,' she says.

She admits that her relationship with Salvador has deteriorated so much that she has thought of taking the children and leaving him. She has done this before; just before Benedito was born, she went back to her family home in Tenga. Although both her parents are now dead, Carolina could live with her brothers and sisters. It would mean giving up their new life and a house that she says is, in fact, legally registered in Rosita's name.

'When he is here, we are always quarrelling – life is not good and we are no longer a happy family,' Carolina says. 'He claims the house belongs to him. Well, he can stay with his house, and we can go.'

Over the next couple of days I get to see Rosita's house, and to meet Salvador. A clean and tidy home of about 600sq ft, the house has tiled floors, three small black sofas in the living-room, and a bathroom with a fitted sink, lavatory and bath. In

the backyard, there is a small reed enclosure with an open fire that they prefer to use for cooking. Salvador is short, his hair closely cropped, and he looks a little dishevelled. He wears an oversize polo shirt, shorts that come down past his knees, and old plastic flip-flops. There is a long, deep scar on the back of his neck. Within 10 minutes of our meeting, Salvador shows me electricity and water bills that are in arrears. 'It's true that we both work, and earn some money, but it is not enough,' he tells me. 'After we have paid for food and paid our bills, our money is gone.' At one point, he even tells Rosita to ask me for money, and she reluctantly but politely obliges. It is something I feel sure Carolina would never ask Rosita to do.

While Carolina's relationship with Salvador is clearly troubled, there is one aspect of her story in which her connection to him proved invaluable: during the floods of 2000 several members of Salvador's family played a crucial role in saving both her life and Rosita's. It emerges during our conversations that – contrary to what Carolina told me when we met in Washington and much that has been reported since – she actually spent time in two

Carolina's common-law husband Salvador outside their house, built for them by the Mozambique government

'WHEN HE IS HERE, WE ALWAYS QUARREL – WE ARE NO LONGER A HAPPY FAMILY'

trees during the floods, and was courageously rescued by Salvador's 22-year-old brother, Carlitos.

The waters first came to Bilene-Mundial at about 3pm on a Sunday. They rose steadily throughout the rest of that day, but Salvador's family managed to build platforms inside their huts so that they could sleep safely that night. In the morning, with the floodwaters continuing to rise, they decided to climb into the nearby mafureira trees. Most of the family, including Carolina's daughter, Celina, and her parents-in-law, were in one tree; in the confusion, Carolina climbed another tree, some 60ft away, with Benedito bound to her back, and a young girl from the village. Carolina spread out on a branch as best she could. She had no food or water. As night fell, the family realised they couldn't risk sleeping in case one of them fell into the water; they called each other's names and shouted words of encouragement to Carolina. During the second night, Salvador's grandmother fell, exhausted, into the rushing water and was swept away. The family never recovered her body.

The next day Carolina suffered pre-contraction pains, but these passed. During the early morning on Wednesday, however, the labour pains became severe. 'I was crying, and shouting out to Salvador's family in the other tree that I was in agony, that I was going to deliver the child,' she tells me. 'I felt I was going to die.'

Salvador's mother told her son Carlitos to swim to Carolina and bring her back to their tree, where she could look after her. Carlitos was the only young man available and the strongest swimmer.

'Even though the waters were not flowing quite so fast by then, we had to develop a strategy to transfer Carolina without too much danger,' Salvador's father, Benedito, says. 'We tied a rope to Carlitos's wrist, held on to one end, and he managed to swim to Carolina's tree. He then tied the rope to her wrist and, while Carlitos swam beside her to keep her head above water, we pulled Carolina to our tree.' He then went back for the children, rescuing them in the same way.

Carolina was in labour over the next few hours, but luckily the family spotted a helicopter approaching their tree. Realising that Carolina needed immediate medical assistance, Carlitos again attached the rope, jumped into the water, and managed to attract the attention of the crew.

A soldier winched the family to safety, one by one, but Carolina's 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 the family to safe ground. Ten minutes later Carolina gave birth, and the baby was wrapped in a cloth and kept warm.

When the helicopter returned 40 minutes later, an army paramedic was winched down to the mother; he cut the umbilical cord and tied it with a clip. The baby, then Carolina, and finally the mother-in-law were lifted into the helicopter and flown to hospital in Chibuto. The baby girl was named Rosita after Carolina's mother-in-law.

Carlitos died of an unknown disease at Carolina's new home in 2004, but she believes that he deserves credit in her story. 'He risked his life to save me and if he hadn't rescued me, I don't know what I would have done,' she says. 'Carlitos is a hero.'

On my final morning in Chibuto I visit Rosita at her primary school. Thirteen hundred pupils attend the school; there are 43 in Rosita's class. Because there are not enough desks or schoolrooms, Rosita's class is taught outside, on the ground, in the shade of a tree. She seems happy and healthy. 'Rosita has a few difficulties in maths and in reading, but she's a good and well-behaved student,' her teacher, Graça Machava, says.

When Carolina returns from work later that day, we discuss the more positive aspects of her family's unlikely change of circumstances. But she complains that many of the organisations that helped in the past are no longer assisting her family, and that most of the benefits that have accrued from her and Rosita's story have gone to other people. A nearby group of 70 or so houses was built recently for flood victims by the Italian St Egidio community with money raised in Rosita's name.

Carolina knows that she and her daughter are incredibly lucky, and much better off than many in her country. Mozambique is the ninth-poorest nation in the world: 48 per cent of its people suffer from malnutrition; 71 per cent are without safe drinking water; and almost 78 per cent live on less than £1 a day. 'There were many people who died in the floods and we survived, so I know we are at an advantage,' she says. 'I am very happy and grateful for that.'

There are also three other bank accounts that could make a huge difference to Rosita's future. When she turns 18, she will be able to access money put aside in Maputo for her education. President Chissano established an account of about £525; an Italian religious group (Carolina could not remember its name) donated almost £1,600; and Mozambique International raised £8,500.

While Carolina acknowledges the generosity and importance of these funds, she feels they would help the family enormously now. The government's much-publicised guarantee of a school education for Rosita, Celina and Benedito has so far not materialised. When the children start secondary school at 13, and fees are incurred, she worries that she will not be able to afford to send them. 'If we do not have the money, and nobody helps us, then Rosita and my other children will just sit at home.'

It is a huge change in aspirations in one generation, and I ask Rosita what she wants to be when she grows up. 'I would like to become a doctor and help the sick and go and work in many different countries,' she replies.

I ask Carolina whether she thinks, if I return to visit Rosita when she is 14 or 21, her daughter will possibly be on the way to realising her ambition.

'I don't want to choose for her and she must achieve her own goals herself,' she says. 'Obviously I would like her to take best advantage of what opportunities she has, but it is all drawn up by God and as he intended. He decided that there would be floods and that I would give birth to Rosita in a tree and we would be rescued. It was not an accident; it was an act of God.' ■