

CHIEF Afonso Napota and 700 of his followers arrived in the shattered Mozambican town of Mugulama last month, joining thousands of other peasants across the central Zambezia Province who have been forced by the government army to leave their homes in rebel-controlled zones.

The arrival of Napota and four other chiefs from the village of Muasiwa, about one day's walk from Mugulama, symbolised the telling blows delivered by the army of President Joaquim Chissano's government against the Mozambique National Resistance (Renamo).

The new arrivals are called the *recuperados* (recuperated) and, until recently, they formed the rebels' civilian base. The army, in a bid to strengthen Frelimo's hand at the third round of peace talks in Rome, is rounding them up.

The *recuperados* are swelling the overcrowded camps for displaced civilians set up by international and Mozambican aid agencies, bringing the number of people in Zambezia dependent on food aid to over 900 000. A \$136-million United Nations sponsored appeal for emergency aid in April request-

Frelimo victories. But one million starve

ed food for just 429 000 people.

Napota, whose father was a chief before Mozambique's 1975 independence from Portugal, was appointed head chief by the rebels when they entered Zambezia five years ago. Renamo took advantage of the traditional leaders' disenchantment with the government. The chiefs became Renamo's key to organising food supplies and labour.

But Renamo's relationship with the chiefs appears to have soured in recent months as civilians, facing severe shortages of salt, clothes and cooking oil, have tired of handing over food to the rebels. "They said I was not able to get the people to their meetings, to co-operate," Napota said of the Renamo guerrillas.

Some peasants in Mugulama said they were pleased to be free of the rebels, to whom each homestead had to donate at least one kilogramme of flour a week.

Other villagers complained, however,

The Mozambican government troops are recovering lost ground but the victims are the hundreds of thousands of peasants trapped between the soldiers and the Renamo rebels. By KARL MAJER

that while they had ample food supplies at home, in Mugulama refugee camp they were dependent on small rations of corn, beans and oil. Several said government troops had burned their homes.

The army led Napota's community from Muasiwa on September 13, two weeks after the rebels abandoned positions they had held for five years.

The army drive in Zambezia is part of a broader offensive aided by troops, including elite paratroopers from Zimbabwe, in the Manica, Sofala, and Tete provinces. Renamo cited the renewed at-

tacks to justify its boycott of scheduled negotiations last month. While Western diplomats in Maputo believe the talks will resume this month, other analysts question whether the rebels will be ready to return to the bargaining table when their military position is under pressure.

"The delays by Renamo in going to Rome reflect their loss of position on the ground," said a Western military analyst. "They might return to the table soon but they will string the government along until the rainy season when they can hope to regain some lost turf."

The ill-fed and ill-equipped Frelimo army has proved unable to hold captured areas.

In response to repeated Zimbabwean and Frelimo offensives around the rebels' Gorongosa stronghold in Sofala, Renamo has begun transferring its military headquarters to land at the confluence of the Zambezi and Shire rivers

called the Ilha de Inhangoma.

Military analysts dismiss claims by Renamo representatives, including rebel leader Afonso Dhlakama, that Zimbabwean troops are operating in Zambezia Province and that Tanzanian and Cuban soldiers are fighting alongside Frelimo. The last contingent of Tanzanian troops left Zambezia in 1988, and Cuba has never committed troops to the Mozambican war, these analysts say.

Ironically, the government army in Zambezia is getting critical help from a peasant militia armed only with spears and the belief that their champion, a traditional healer named Manuel Antonio, has employed the spirit of God to protect them from modern weapons. The army has convinced peasants to abandon areas controlled by Renamo.

Military success in the countryside has come at a critical time for the Chissano government, which is seeking to end the war with the peace talks and political reforms, including replacement of the 15-

year-old one-party state with a multi-party democracy. The People's Assembly opened an extraordinary session in Maputo in October to approve a liberal constitution and Bills legalising opposition parties and elections by secret ballot.

For Renamo, the setbacks on the battlefield have been costly. The rebels reportedly receive limited support from

South African special forces, Malawi's Young Pioneers paramilitary force and the Kenyan government. But most military analysts doubt whether they are receiving enough outside support to launch a major counter-offensive.



Joaquim Chissano

Meanwhile, places like Mugulama have become the symbols of the human cost of a conflict which has claimed hundreds of thousands of civilian lives and sent at least one million people fleeing to neighbouring countries.

A Renamo battalion, reportedly led by Calisto Meque, captured the town in 1988. Frelimo recaptured the area in December last year. Residents were moved away as the rebels retook the town, and then brought back again in January when the army regained control. Two months later, aid agencies were called in. By then 20 to 30 people were dying of starvation each day.

The story of Mugulama is being repeated throughout Zambezia Province, Mozambique's most fertile and populous region, where the number of people threatened by famine is approaching one million. On October 2, government relief officials in Quelimane, Zambezia's capital, asked foreign aid agencies for emergency relief to a quell a new disaster area around the town of Murrua, where the army had overrun a rebel base and "recuperated" 52 000 homeless people.