

Mozambique Is Weighing a Political End To Its War

By SHEILA RULE

A JOKE around this capital city has President Joaquim A. Chissano, Mikhail S. Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan out for a sightseeing drive in Washington. President Reagan instructs the driver to keep turning right. Seeing that the car is going in circles, Mr. Gorbachev takes over. He tells the driver to keep turning left. Finally, President Chissano takes command. Signal left, he tells the driver, but turn right.

The story is enjoyed by Mozambicans and Westerners here, but the point it makes is no laughing matter. This avowedly Marxist Government is aggressively pursuing international economic and political support by improving relations with the West while maintaining historic ties to Moscow. The ruling Frelimo movement is looking to virtually everyone for help against economic crumbling and a blood-draining insurgency that has made the country a study in suffering.

Scenes of hopelessness are like scars on this land on Africa's southeastern coast. Babies with distended bellies cling to their mothers' collapsed breasts. People wearing only tree bark wander along the roads, fleeing a 12-year-old war against rebels seen as surrogates of South Africa. Large-scale slaughters of civilians are now so commonplace, it is said, that they are not considered massacres unless more than 50 people are killed.

President Chissano inherited the problems and no easy solutions when, 15 months ago, he succeeded Samora Machel, the charismatic leader who died in a plane crash just inside the South African border.

Since then, Mr. Chissano has been struggling. He has boldly carried out major economic policy changes begun before Mr. Machel's death. Failed socialist programs have given way to devaluation of the national currency, encouragement of private peasant agriculture in place of inefficient state farms and the lifting of price controls on a wide range of agricultural goods.

Initial effects of the economic about-face can be seen in this decaying port city, where the potholes outnumber the cars. The main market, for example, has been transformed from a barren testimony of disastrous policies to a cornucopia of fresh fruit and vegetables.

Mr. Chissano is also using the skills he acquired in 12 years as Mozambique's Foreign Minister. Political experts here say that the diplomatic maneuvers are in part intended to get governments such as the United States and Britain to persuade South Africa to abandon what

Mozambicans view as a policy of using the rebels to destabilize their country.

The war remains Mr. Chissano's greatest challenge. Efforts to right the economy will be doomed unless the army, which is bolstered by thousands of Zimbabwean and Tanzanian troops, can begin to turn the tide. The guerrillas have picked as major targets once-productive agricultural areas and major roads, attacking convoys carrying produce and relief supplies.

Concerns about security are also deflecting much-needed foreign investment from a country that uses more than 40 percent of its budget for defense.

Talking to Third Parties

The Government says it is standing firm in its refusal to negotiate with the rebels, the Mozambique National Resistance, who are known by their Portuguese acronym Renamo.

But diplomats and Government officials say Mr. Chissano has accelerated a diplomatic process that could lead to a political settlement. He met with President Reagan last year and agreed that a non-military solution must be found. The Government later offered amnesty and a promise of reintegration in society to the shadowy rebels, said to consist of displaced Portuguese colonialists, opponents and defectors from Frelimo, as well as Mozambicans who have found in banditry an alternative to grinding poverty.

The United States has extolled Frelimo's steps and has said it would not deal with the rebels.

"We are pleased to hear that President Chissano is not committed to just a military solution but is willing to pursue other options," said Melissa Wells, the United States Ambassador in Maputo, whose confirmation was held up for months by conservative Republicans opposed to closer ties with Maputo. "He is asking for support and collaboration. I think one of the first steps is the amnesty and I'd like to think in the future we will see more steps taken."

Mr. Chissano appears to have few options. A military settlement would take massive assistance that does not appear to be forthcoming. The army has Soviet weaponry but lacks transport, communications and logistical support. The soldiers' uniforms are so tattered that it is hard to distinguish them from the rebels.

"We know we are going to have war and that it is going to continue for a long time," said Jorge Aranda Silva, the Minister of Trade. "It is a pity because we are losing the possibility of building in Southern Africa a model of development in Africa."