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# A studied ambiguity

## The Vatican's oblique message to war-torn Mozambique echoes the silences of the local bishops

TRAVELLING after dusk to avoid attack, 46-year-old Joao de Jesus Namuruma led 30 fellow Catholics on a harrowing three-night, 160 kilometre drive over war-scarred roads to greet their church's leader.

They carried a sign declaring "John Paul II: you are on a mission of peace".

"Courage, faith" and hope that the Pope's words can "work as a seed in the people's soul to bring peace" sustained them along a route littered with burnt vehicles, said Namuruma, a lay preacher.

In April Renamo twice attacked his village, Calaua, burning government buildings and kidnapping many of their neighbours.

Villagers aren't sure "why they kill", he said, "but we think when Frelimo (government) troops attack their military bases Renamo retaliates by attacking the people".

This clear, simple testimony contrasted sharply with a papal message

which was uncommonly ambiguous even by Vatican standards.

The Pope spoke compassionately of Mozambique's suffering. He praised the "generosity and great sacrifice" of church workers, singling out for praise lay leaders who risk their lives to preach Christianity and comfort to suffering people "in regions so vast and so struck by war."

Yet when he discussed means for ending the war the Pope became so cryptic that, in the words of one senior Western diplomat, "anyone with an axe to grind can claim he supports their position".

The Pope studiously avoided explicit criticism of Renamo or Frelimo, echoing the local bishops' silence.

He joined them in implicitly backing Frelimo-Renamo talks by endorsing the "efforts of my brother Mozambican bishops in favour of peace

and urging "dialogue for reconciliation which will end the shedding of the blood of brothers".

Yet the Mozambican government could plausibly claim their alternative peace plan also matches the papal message. Frelimo offers amnesty to any rebel who surrenders but says South Africa's Renamo-backers sustain the war and are therefore the only plausible partners for peace talks.

Officials interpreted the Pope's appeal for "sons of this beloved Mozambican people" to "put aside actions of destruction" as urging Renamo to stop fighting.

They likewise interpreted his call for the world community to "do everything possible so that discord in this country should not be fomented from the outside" as aimed at South African destabilisation.

Yet these words could alternately be

read as urging Frelimo's military backers — who range across the world political spectrum from Britain to the Soviet Union — to stop giving arms. This would be in keeping with past bishops' suggestions that military aid to both sides stop.

Papal ambiguity reflected the local bishops' desire to downplay disagreements with the government.

Had he come a few years ago, the Pope might have angrily denounced Frelimo for its 1970s seizures of church property and other religious freedom violations. In recent years, however, the government has moved to return seized buildings, lift restrictions on religion and forge new links with the churches.

Co-operation around the visit ushered in a "new era of good relations between church and state", said Jesuit priest Ezekial Gwembe, the church's papal visit co-ordinator.

State-linked media enthusiastically

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The Pope in Mocambique ... pensive but non-committal

Picture: DON EDKINS, Afrapix

By STEVE ASKIN in Mampula, Mozambique

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# A message that's all things to all

promoted the visit and offered live broadcasts of major events. The government provided special military escorts for buses carrying papal pilgrims. To promote attendance at papal masses, holidays were declared in the cities the Pope visited.

Despite this unprecedented public support for a primarily pastoral visit, the enthusiastic crowds greeting Pope John Paul II were everywhere smaller than expected.

The combined turnout at the main events in Maputo, Beira and Nampula was perhaps 100 000 people, fewer than planned for in Beira alone.

Nonetheless, papal silence on key

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issues suggested a Catholic church scared by past conflicts with Frelimo may still cling to the notion that Renamo represents some alternative.

The Pope's ambiguity contrasted with the strong condemnation of Renamo as Pretoria-linked terrorists by foreign guests in Mozambique at the same time as the Pope's British Foreign Secretary Sir Geoffrey Howe and South African Council of Churches president Manas Buthelezi.

It also reflects the pre-programmed nature of a papal tour. Speeches were written before he set foot in Africa,

and the schedule offered the Pope little chance to learn first hand of Mozambique's plight by conversing with war victims.

Had he stopped to chat, random interviews in the crowds greeting him in all three cities suggested, almost everyone had a tragic story to tell about personal or immediate family experiences of Renamo violence targeted against civilians. By contrast, the few reports of Frelimo hurting civilians involved people caught between the two forces in war zones.

Instead the Pope's main contact with ordinary Mozambicans came in staged events like the laying of a pa-

papal hand of blessing on wheelchair-bound cripples in Beira.

Among those the Pope blessed was 30-year-old Joaquim Tole, who offered a sharper image of Mozambique's problem than could be found in a dozen papal addresses over three and a half days.

Tole lost a leg in 1982 by stepping on a landmine while fleeing an attack in which Renamo killed two civilians, one of them a pregnant woman.

Only God knows when the war will end, Tole said. But on one fact he was certain: "Renamo is not fighting against the government but just against innocent civilians."