

Mozambique peace process jolted by assault on rebel HQ

THE DELICATE peace process under way in Mozambique has been shaken after an attack by government forces on rebel headquarters aborted a planned meeting last week between the insurgent leader, Afonso Dhlakama, and senior Mozambican church officials in Nairobi.

The raid, reported to have been carried out by helicopter gunships and paratroopers on the main base of the Mozambique National Resistance (Renamo) in the central region of Gorongosa, took place early on 12 July as Mr Dhlakama was preparing to depart for the Kenyan capital.

News of the reported attack, which Mozambican officials have not confirmed, caught most observers by surprise. The Nairobi meeting was expected to draw from Mr Dhlakama a response to President Joaquim Chissano's offer to open peace talks to end the 14-year-old civil war.

"There is no way Chissano ordered the attack, and while the peace process might be delayed a bit, it will continue," said one African diplomat. "Both sides probably hope it was just a case of poor communications."

By late yesterday, there was no news of Mr Dhlakama's fate. Officials of Mozambique's Anglican and Catholic churches remained in Nairobi in case the meeting could still take place.

The reported raid occurred as Mr Chissano was discussing peace prospects in Mozambique with the visiting US Assistant Secretary of State, Herman Cohen, and with his own Frelimo central committee, which today ends six days of meetings in preparation for the party's Fifth Congress from 24 to 31 July.

In a departing statement on 13 July, Mr Cohen appeared to confirm the contents of a confidential government offer to initiate peace talks if the rebels renounced violence and agreed to adhere to constitutional rule. "If Renamo announces the acceptance of this principle," he said, "I believe it is possible to proceed with negotiations in the very near future."