

Kenya agrees to mediate in Mozambican civil war

Paul Fauvet in Maputo

KENYA has agreed to mediate in the conflict between the Mozambique Government and South African-backed rebels, the Mozambican President, Joaquim Chissano, said at the weekend.

With the fifth congress of the ruling Frelimo party due to open in Maputo today, the Kenyan mediation spearheads a broad African initiative to end the war.

President Chissano told journalists at the weekend that President Daniel Arap Moi of Kenya had agreed to mediate between the government and the Mozambique National Resistance (MNR).

President Moi visited Maputo late last week to discuss the next steps in a peace initiative which has so far involved the Kenyan Government brokering discreet contacts in Nairobi between Mozambican church leaders and MNR representatives.

President Chissano said that he and President Moi had decided to set up a group of African leaders to assist in the peace process.

The first head of state to be drawn into the group was President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, a country with about 10,000 troops inside Mozambique helping the army in the war against the MNR.

President Chissano said he met Mr Mugabe in the central Mozambican city of Beira earlier this month, to ask him for help. The group could later be broadened to include other African leaders.

His remarks effectively cut out South Africa, which has made no secret of wanting to play a big role in mediating a conflict which it has done so much to promote in the past.

President Moi told President Chissano that he had contacted the MNR, telling them "to see the light." He was "very optimistic that they are willing to participate in talks with your government."

The brutal guerrilla warfare waged by the MNR since soon after independence from Portugal in 1975 has killed an estimated 600,000 Mozambicans and crippled the country's farming-based economy, now heavily dependent on foreign aid.

The Mozambican Govern-

ment's strategy is to put both military and diplomatic pressure on the MNR. The peace initiatives have not interrupted a government offensive in the central province of Sofala, where the MNR is headquartered.

The army says that it killed 344 rebels in Sofala between April and June. Reports circulating in Maputo indicate that the much contested town of Maringue, close to the rebel headquarters, is back in government hands.

President Chissano is insisting that conditions for serious dialogue with the MNR must include an end to "acts of banditry and terrorism." In effect, MNR members are being offered incorporation into Mozambican society, if they end the war.

Maputo-based diplomats see this initiative as a bold but typically pragmatic move by President Chissano, who succeeded the charismatic former president, Samora Machel, after he was killed in a plane crash in 1986. The diplomats said the bid for a negotiated peace appeared to have widespread support from Mozambique's war-weary population of 15 million.