

'Meditation is the path to peace'

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Former Marxist guerrilla-turned-president spreads the word of the Beatles' guru to his ministers and military

James Astill in Maputo

President Joaquim Alberto Chissano of Mozambique is one of Africa's more enlightened leaders. Twice a day he tries to attain pure consciousness through transcendental meditation (TM).

The president discovered TM, the teaching of the Beatles' guru, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, in 1992, shortly before the end of Mozambique's 16-year guerrilla war. It was no coincidence.

"First I started the practice of transcendental meditation myself, then introduced the practice to my close family, my Cabinet of ministers, my government officers and my military," Chissano, a former Marxist guerrilla, is on record as saying in literature published by Maharishi devotees. "The result has been political peace and balance in nature in my country."

Said to originate in India's ancient Vedic tradition, TM is based on the theory that stress is the cause of all evil. Yogic flyers, its most advanced practitioners, decrease environmental stress by tapping into pure, or universal, consciousness; thus righting the balance in natural law. Essentially, this involves moving in a series of supposedly gravity-defying, cross-legged bounds while meditating.

Best results are seen when about 8 000 yogic flyers gather in one place. This produces "the Maharishi effect", described as an "upsurge in harmony and social coherence enveloping the Earth".

Disciples claim that when such "coherence-building groups" have met in the past — often in California where the Maharishi was based for a long time — conflicts in Africa and the Mid-

dle East died down measurably.

Maharishi's theory of invincible defence is related to this. Once a "prevention wing" of yogic flyers is formed within an army, Maharishi says, "military power is brought in alliance with the invincible power of natural law, which spontaneously provides safety and security to the government of the universe and eternally defends the sovereign domain of every galaxy and solar system".

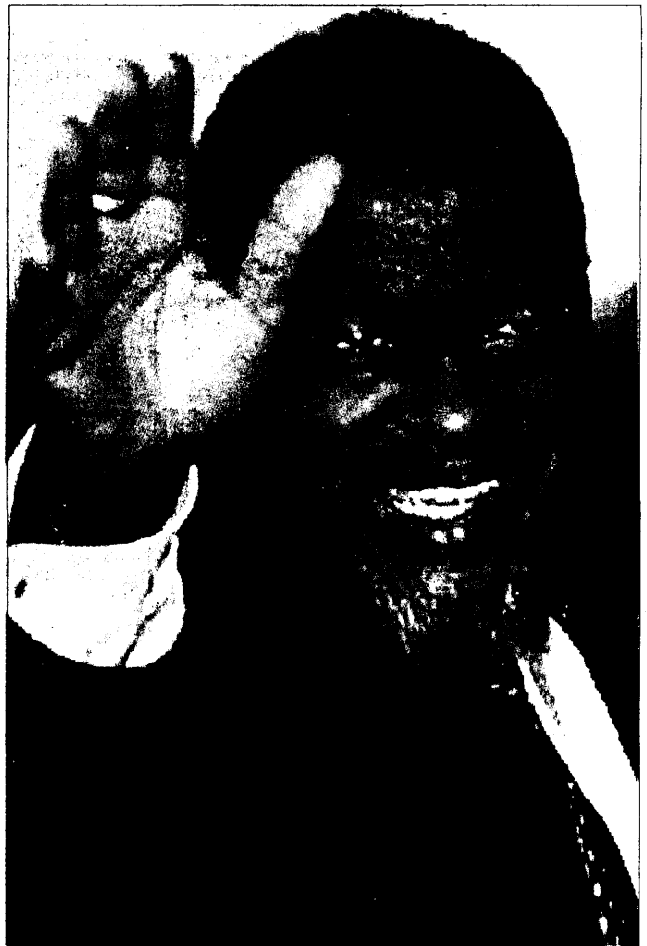
The attractions of this to Chissano and his generals seemed clear. From the end of 1994 all military and police recruits were ordered to meditate for 20 minutes, twice a day. More than 16 000 soldiers were taught yogic flying and TM, according to Mozambique's defence minister. So were 30 000 Mozambicans, according to the Maharishi movement.

In October 1994 the deputy defence minister of the day, Antonio Hama Thay, wrote to the national military school ordering that, "transcendental meditation must be an integral part of the curriculum of the cadets in the school, as a requirement for them to become officers".

According to the current Minister of Defence, Tobias Dai, the effect was overwhelming. Crime levels dropped; a drought was averted and economic growth, predicted at 6%, soared to 19%.

But in the past two months, for

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President Joaquim Chissano is said to be a highly skilled yogic flyer

what the Maharishi Centre in Maputo describes as "administrative reasons", TM has been withdrawn from public life.

The new Deputy Minister of Defence, Henrique Banze, confirms that TM is no longer compulsory in the army, although the practice continues in some units. "My personal opinion is that transcendental meditation and yogic flying did not end the war," he said. "But then I never tried it."

Chissano said this week: "For me it is very relaxing and very simple — I just keep quiet and chant the mantras. The results have been scientifically proven. Many of my ministers find it enhances their capacity to work."

The Minister of Trade, Carlos Morgado, is not one of them. "I'm afraid

I'm too greedy for all that," he said. But the visible effect of TM on the 62-year-old president was striking, Morgado admitted.

"He emerges from each session looking like a strongman, charged up for another 10 hours' work."

Jacob Hermansen, a Norwegian instructor at the Maharishi Centre, claims to have put down an insurrection in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province last year by leading 200 army officers in yogic flying. He predicts more countries will follow Mozambique's example.

Hermansen maintained that Chissano was a highly skilled yogic flyer — though the president has never said as much himself — and had shown the way.