

Frelimo rehabilitates former MNR bandits

With the signing of Nkomati, Frelimo has launched a drive to win the war against bandits on another front. Paul Fauvet reports from Maputo on Frelimo's experiment to pardon and rehabilitate former bandits.

LATE one afternoon at the end of October I watched a cultural group perform on a hillside in the southern Mozambican province of Inhambane. In the local language, Xitsua, they sang songs in praise of President Samora Machel. They danced vigorously, and the most acrobatic among them performed somersaults and other feats of agility.

Nothing very special about this, you might think. Entertainment of this sort exists all over rural Mozambique. It is an integral part of peasant culture.

But the singers and dancers I was watching were not ordinary peasants. Up until a few months ago, they were not entertaining their fellow Mozambicans — they were killing them. For the cultural group here at Chiduco, some 16 kilometres from the town of Massinga, consists of former members of the rebel "Mozambique National Resistance" (MNR) or "armed bandits" as they are referred to in official Mozambican terminology.

Chiduco is one of the first experiments in the rehabilitation of former rebels, in their reintegration into Mozambican society. It is a demonstration that Mozambique is serious about its policy of clemency for those MNR members who surrender to the authorities.

Twice this year, President Samora Machel has announced an amnesty for rebels who surrender — with the warning that those who do not take advantage of this offer will be hunted down "without mercy". An amnesty law is being prepared, but even before its formal approval by Mozambique's

parliament, the People's Assembly, rehabilitation is under way.

Confident that it is winning the war against the MNR, the Mozambican state has not used the draconian legal measures it has at its disposal for some time. The "Law on Crimes against the Security of the People and the People's State" instituted the death penalty for armed rebellion, terrorism and related offences. But there have been no trials under this law, and no executions, for eighteen months. The firing squads were always used sparingly in the past, and usually only against those whose crimes had resulted in civilian deaths — now the firing squads have fallen completely silent. Not even prison sentences are currently being handed down to captured MNR members.

The emphasis is on clemency in order to persuade those still in the bush to surrender. Posters on walls in Inhambane province are directed at the rebels to surrender to the army, but on its own however, propaganda is insufficient. It must be supplemented by concrete examples of the policy of clemency at work. Chiduco is one such example. It is one of two rehabilitation centres in Inhambane (the other is further north, near the river Save). The centre was set up in April at a different site. This proved unsuitable for agriculture, and so in September it was moved to Chiduco.

A small lake, and a stream that feeds into it, indicate that Chiduco does not suffer from lack of water that bedevils agriculture in much of Inhambane.

When I visited Chiduco, the former ban-

dit (known as "os recuperados" — "those who have been recovered") were clearing the land for sowing, and collecting local construction material to build their own houses. They were temporarily housed in large army tents with some sleeping in the open.

There are 30 "recuperados" here, all born in Inhambane, and all of peasant origin. They are thus familiar with the work they will be doing, and there are no linguistic or cultural problems amongst them. They vary in age between 16 and 54. Their level of involvement with MNR also varies greatly. The most elderly amongst them were MNR collaborators rather than active rebels.

But amongst the younger, some admit to participating in the kind of banditry that has made travel in much of the country hazardous. One admitted shamefacedly to me that he had burnt out 15 vehicles on a stretch of the main Maputo-Beira road in 1982. Others have lesser degree of guilt. They were press-ganged into the MNR at the point of a gun, given a few weeks military training, then sent out to steal food from local peasants.

Some claim that they seized the earliest opportunity to flee from MNR bases: others stayed with the rebels for two years or more. Among the group are three women, who claim to have been kept as mistresses by individual bandits.

None of the "recuperados" wish to return to their original home of village. They are afraid of what the response from one-time friends and neighbours might be. The army

is therefore seeking out their families, who will be allowed to join the "recuperados" at Chiduco once the houses are built. But they will not be obliged to go: the authorities are well aware that wives may have no wish to rejoin husbands who have spent months or years committing acts of banditry.

The reaction of local people to the rehabilitation of MNR members is a serious headache for the army. There is always the chance that someone who lost friends or relatives at the hands of the MNR may wish to take revenge. The Provincial Military Commander, Major-General Domingos Fondo, explained that a serious attempt had been made by the Frelimo Party in the pro-

vince to explain the policy of clemency to the people, many of whom were initially sceptical, and could see no good reason for keeping captured bandits alive.

Fondo is confident, however, that the political mobilisation has worked, and that most people in Inhambane now accept the need to reintegrate one-time rebels into peasant society. However, the army is taking no chances. There is a contingent of troops at Chiduco whose purpose is not so much to stop the "recuperados" from running away, as to protect them against any attempt to exact revenge.

Chiduco is just the beginning. General Fondo expects to set up further centres on

similar lines throughout the province. Similar work will take place in the other provinces that have suffered badly from MNR activity.

Rehabilitation will prove to be a massive task, however, if only because of the large numbers involved. There are now over 5 000 MNR members in the hands of the Mozambican authorities (including both those who have surrendered, and those who have been captured). It will take a lot of Chiducos to absorb this number — not to mention the thousands more still in South Africa, who may be handed over to Mozambique if the negotiations between Maputo and Pretoria run smoothly. □
