

BY CANOE, MOTORBIKE AND ON FOOT . . .
TO A RARE MEETING DEEP IN THE MOZAMBIQUE BUSH
WITH THE RENAMO REBELS

INSIDE **SUNDAY
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EXCLUSIVE**
MAD MAX
COUNTRY

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DESERTED towns, empty roads, cannibalised machines, fighting over precious fuel . . . hints of the Mad Max movies, but this was Mozambique.

"Mike Davies" — that's not his real name; he still has family in Zimbabwe, now at war with Renamo — and I wanted to make a film about Renamo and its elusive president, Afonso Dhlakama.

One or two journalists had got into Renamo areas, despite the rebels' cut-throat reputation, but no one had been crazy enough to attempt a long-range penetration with modern — and heavy — professional video equipment. But Mike is a Rambo type, and I tagged along.

We intend to go back, so it would be unwise — and dangerous — to describe exactly how we got in, but it wasn't easy.

Inside Mozambique the journey began with a dugout canoe. Wobbling through fast currents, with hippos grunting alongside, pushing through croc-infested swamps, we fretted over our four heavy packs and the sensitive, expensive camera equipment.

Curious

This was the start of a hard trip through some exquisitely beautiful countryside.

After a short march we met our first Renamo contact . . . blue jeans, purple teacoy hat, riding a bicycle and carrying the ubiquitous symbol of Renamo rank, a transistor radio in a gaudy, homemade bag.

He led us past curious sentries carrying that other symbol of guerrilla war, the AK rifle.

Everybody tended to stare, especially in isolated villages where young people were perhaps seeing white men for the first time.

Eventually we walked into a small transit camp. Language was immediately a problem.

We managed to communicate vaguely in a mixture of pigeon Portuguese and basic Shona, although I insisted on amusing myself, and confusing our hosts, by quoting continuously from a very old Portuguese phrase book. Thus: "Would anyone care to partner me in a waltz?"

We were treated politely and fed mealie meal and chicken. For two weeks we had the same food, except when we ate tinned Russian fish, courtesy of Frelimo.

Anxious

Mike and I had been together behind the Russian lines in Afghanistan and so we worried about those terrible Soviet gunships which make local

choppers look like dragonflies.

Mike had secretly been into Maputo the week before and had counted the gunships lined up at the airport. The guerrillas appeared to be using a very basic radio code to arrange our transit from one base to the next, so we were anxious about Soviet interception of the signals.

If caught, we would no doubt have been paraded as South African spies. As it happened, our worst problems did come swooping out of the sky — mosquitoes.

After the transit camp we travelled on small motorbikes, again a reluctant gift from Frelimo, 60km to the main base in Zambesia Province.

It was large and well hidden among mountains and in deep forest. About 500 guerrillas lived there, plus thousands of camp followers.

Here we witnessed examples of the stern discipline of the rebels, who have a strict punishment code, especially if the guerrillas intimidate the *povo* (the masses).

Renamo troops sign up for the duration. They are not supposed to marry any of the female warriors who fight alongside them . . . until the war is over.

Morale is high, although the standard of military training is very low and the weapons were usually in a terrible condition.

Remember, these are second-generation guerrillas. Frelimo perhaps absorbed 30 percent of the expertise of their Eastern bloc instructors, and Renamo, many of whose officers are ex-Frelimo, have in turn adopted a percentage of their original training, beefed up occasionally in the past by Rhodesian and South African training.

The general in charge of Zambesia Province is something of an eccentric; his whimsically autocratic ways reminded us of Shaka's court.

Mike, a former medic, cured the general's stomach problems,

and he reciprocated with a series of drunken parties where we were obliged to dance and, in my case, to sing a "traditional song", a rather rude rugby ditty in Welsh.

Drunkenness is exceptional, however, partly because of the tight discipline and partly because of the paucity of any commercially produced liquor (or any goods).

After a week in the camp, which was infested with rats, we

travelled 200km south to the Zambesi River in a convoy of three small motorbikes. Villagers rushed to greet us everywhere we stopped bringing mealiepap and water.

In this raw, primitive, regressive Africa, Renamo seemed to have no problems with their "hearts and minds" campaign.

We passed abandoned Portuguese stores and farms: here a beautiful cathedral picked clean, and there a devastated town, eerily still, a HNP nightmare realised.

A tractor stood gutted on the dirt road; later a train with carriages strewn over the overgrown embankment. We saw no wildlife except for four buck, two troops of baboons and many snakes. It was a little like the post-apocalypse film "The Day After".

Crippled

A half-finished bridge stood to attention on each side of the wide Zambesi; millions and millions of rands' worth of heavy plant equipment were frozen and derelict.

A large sub-station for the Cabora Bassa grid lay crippled and helpless; bits of the transformers decorated the locals' huts.

All was not death and destruction, however. The peasants had been given back their land and their chiefs. Elementary schooling had recommenced. The Catholic religion seemed to flourish again.

After crossing the Zambesi on a captured Frelimo inflatable boat, our small party reached Caia in Sofala Province.

Rendezvous

Again an obviously once pretty Portuguese town, now empty except for a Renamo control point and some Frelimo prisoners eking out an existence on the outskirts.

We raced now on tarmac roads, then later turned into the forests of the Gorongosa region to keep our rendezvous with Mocambique's Scarlet Pimpernel, Afonso Dhlakama.

He is a key man in the future of Southern Africa: he controls the destiny of the

Beira Corridor. Without that escape hatch there can be no effective war — economic, political or military — against Pretoria.

Enemy

The first time we saw him he was dressed very simply in a blue shirt and dark slacks, sitting quietly at a simple table in a grass hut. At 33 and bespectacled he looks like a younger, chubbier version of his arch-enemy, Robert Mugabe. He laughs easily.

This Catholic mission-trained father of two little girls is both relaxed and confident. Highly intelligent, he speaks a very precise Portuguese, although he understands English. Unlike other politicians, he was keen to listen.

He vehemently denied any involvement with Malawi or South Africa, and emphasised Renamo's self-sufficiency: "We have no complex theory; our strategy is simple. It is based upon the support of the people."

For almost two days Mike and I grilled him, especially about the fatal South African connection. Here was a movement born and reborn in original sin from Rhodesian and South African parents.

But he demonstrated a dislike of South Africa which was exacerbated by the signing of Nkomati Accord. "We were told about it just a week before the signing," he said.

Our discussions and examination of captured new equipment suggested, but did not prove, that South Africa had not only switched sides, but was busy militarily supporting Frelimo, not Renamo.

Our long talk touched on many fascinating topics: how the Vaz diary was forged by Frelimo intelligence; the propaganda victory Frelimo had secured when Renamo temporarily withdrew, after a tip-off, from their Gorongosa HQ in 1985, "without the loss of a single man or piece of equipment"; the Renamo distrust of Chester Crocker; and historical details such as new light on the murder of Zanla general Josiah Tongogara, arranged by Machel and Mugabe.

We did demur on some points. I argued that if the infamous Vaz document was a forgery, then the forger had shown brilliant insights into the rifts between Pretoria's civil-military elite.

Dhlakama felt utterly confident about the future. The war, he prophesied, would be won within two years.

"The economy of Mozambique is in pieces and paralysed," he said. "There can be no recovery until the end of the war. A large part of the population is controlled by Renamo. Frelimo is only found in the cities."

When we pointed out that Renamo had very little international support, an atrocious public image, lacked modern weapons and even a propaganda radio station, the president was unperturbed.

Even if black rule came to "Azania" and Malawi went socialist it would not affect the popular support of the people and the fact that Frelimo was crumbling, he maintained.

"I would like to tell those Western countries which give aid to Frelimo that all the aid goes to the armed forces. When they supply food, it doesn't go to the needy people, but to the Frelimo army.

"And aid money is used to buy weapons to maintain themselves in power. The aid doesn't reach those who are dying of hunger; the money goes only to the government and army."

Honest

We bade farewell to this impressive man and promised to return again. His lack of experience with journalists showed — he was too honest.

Because his off-the-record discussions were potentially damaging and naive, we reckoned that perhaps his denials about any entanglements with Pretoria and Banda — as well as the evidence of our own eyes — rang true.

Nevertheless, as we made the arduous return trip, we wondered about the amazingly coincidental congruence of Renamo's and Pretoria's strategies.



Mozambique: Dhlakama claims Frelimo is now only found in the cities

**Dhlakama
says he
hates SA.
It rings
true...**