

Why Mozambique's rebels merit no US support

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By Robert I. Rotberg

THE United States has a welcome opportunity to wean a beleaguered, impoverished, and strategically valuable African state away from Marxism while simultaneously alleviating widespread hunger and encouraging the best kind of national reconstruction. Yet its doing so is being thwarted by conservative Republicans in the Senate.

Mozambique, a sweltering, underdeveloped country stretching 1,800 miles along the Indian Ocean between Tanzania and South Africa, is the state in question. Governed since 1975 by the leaders of the Mozambique Liberation Front (Frelimo), it has moved dramatically within the last three years from close friendship with the Soviet Union to a more open and eclectic approach to world politics.

Joaquim Chissano, who succeeded the late Samora Machel as president last November, has made improvements in relations with the US, Britain, and Portugal, the former colonial power, among his priorities.

A pragmatic man, he desperately needs Western assistance if his government is to survive the destabilization efforts of South Africa, Mozambique's big, bullying neighbor to the south and west. South Africa has long backed the Mozambique National Resistance (Renamo) guerrillas in their war against Frelimo. Although South Africa promised to cease backing Renamo in a US-brokered good-neighbor treaty with Mozambique in 1984, funds and arms continued covertly to flow to the local version of the contras.

In recent years, with widespread drought, official Mozambique's economic and managerial deficiencies, falling standards of living, a demoralized army, and attacks by Renamo, continued Frelimo rule has become very questionable.

Renamo, a South African proxy guerrilla militia with no indigenous ethnic or popular base and no political program, controls interior sections of Mozambique



Joaquim Chissano

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and has emerged as a significant threat to Frelimo. Leading Republican senators, led by Jesse Helms of North Carolina, and Robert Dole, the presidential contender from Kansas, now want the US to abandon its support for the government of Mozambique and back the anti-communist forces of Renamo.

The US State Department, and so far, the White House, are attempting to beat back this right-wing threat to what is a carefully conceived policy in southern Africa. The State Department is working with President Chissano to increase West-

ern ties so that Moscow's declining influence will become increasingly irrelevant.

The State Department proposed development aid, but its request for supplemental funds was recently rejected by Congress on ideological and fiscal grounds. Humanitarian assistance is now being debated. Currently, too, Senators Helms and Dole, and other prominent Republicans, are holding up the confirmation of Secretary of State George Shultz's nominee as the next US ambassador to Mozambique:

Melissa Wells is a career officer of impressive standing who recently served as ambassador to the Portuguese-speaking African nations of Guinea-Bissau, and Cape Verde. She has become the latest political football in Washington's ongoing struggle between a pro-South African lobby and State Department attempts to forge a sensible alliance in southern Africa with new progressives.

Chissano is a new progressive. He and his government have learned from their socialistic excesses. They have experienced the folly of relying on the Soviet Union, which aids Africans only on its own narrow terms, after exacting onerous fees and hard-currency payments in return.

Since Mozambique has begun, however tentatively, to embrace the market incentive system and to encourage entrepreneurship, it is foolish and counterproductive for Senators Helms, Dole, and others to embrace a puffed-up, non-legitimate movement like Renamo. Given Renamo's close ties to South Africa, and Washington's post-constructive engagement policy of concerted antagonism to apart-

heid, support for Renamo would be distinctly destructive.

Britain, the European Economic Community, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Malawi, and India all support Frelimo. Britain, in particular, has delivered aid and training assistance to the army. Scandinavian countries and Holland are helping to relieve famine and to return the ports of central and northern Mozambique to their pre-1975 levels of efficiency. Zimbabwe and Tanzania are fighting alongside Frelimo's army against Renamo.

To such questions of ideology and governmental survival are added the immediate realities of famine. Congressman Mickey Leland (D-Texas) and his Select Committee on Hunger assert that a third of Mozambique's 14 million people will need food assistance this year.

Senator Dole, using this same issue, claims that to alleviate hunger in the Mozambican interior, the US should channel humanitarian help through Renamo. He and others are thus trying to cloud the main issue, which is whether the US, which has only recently moderated its cozy approach to white South Africa, should join that country in contributing to the destabilization of Mozambique.

President Chissano has begun turning his country around economically and diplomatically. He needs all the support he can muster. By backing his government, the US will bolster both the short and long-term stability of southern Africa.

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