

# All condemn Renamo. Except the Bishops

STEVE ASKIN

THE Pope's toughest challenge is Mozambique, where virtually all knowledgeable observers — except the local Catholic hierarchy — condemn Renamo for waging the most gruesome anti-civilian war since Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge ravaged Kampuchea.

"A vision of horror", was how a key papal advisor on social questions, Cardinal Roger Etchegaray of the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace, described the suffering he saw in Mozambique last year. A prominent Irish Catholic leader, Bishop Eamon Casey of Galway, condemned "the destabilisation policy carried out by the apartheid government" through Renamo when he visited the country in July.

Local Protestant leaders take a similar stand. Though Renamo's external backers sometimes claim the group is fighting against communism and for religious freedom, "it is very hard to see how slaughtering an old lady or a little child is to fight communism", says the Anglican bishop of southern Mozambique, Dinis Sengulane.

Mozambique's Catholic bishops, on the other hand, say they don't know who is killing their people and limit themselves to vague appeals for reconciliation between Renamo and Frelimo.

The difference may stem partly from differing historic experiences. In the colonial era, Protestantism was systematically suppressed, making post-independence restrictions seem

less severe by comparison — even in the early days when Frelimo militants forcibly seized and shut houses of worship, including Muslim mosques along with Protestant and Catholic churches.

For the Catholic Church, independence meant a dramatic loss of wealth and power. Though a handful of missionaries opposed colonialism, "nowhere else had the central ecclesiastical system been so closely identified with colonial oppression," wrote Adrian Hastings, a leading historian of African Christianity.

Whatever the historic roots of Frelimo action against churches at independence, Catholic and Protestant leaders agree violations of religious freedom have stopped. Today, Mozambique's churches are full of worshippers. Devout Christians participate actively in government and officials work closely with churches on relief and development projects.

The treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses, a sect banned in most African nations because they refuse to salute flags, join armies or demonstrate loyalty to any state, provides the best index of change. At independence, Mozambique exiled them to a remote northern district, Milange.

In 1986, Renamo squads attacked, forcing the sect to flee to Malawi. They soon returned to Mozambique, partly because their church is banned by Malawi's Life President Hastings Banda. Mozambique lifted restrictions and flew them back to their exile homes, in and near Maputo.

Leaders of every organised religion benefitted from growing tolerance, even government support.

The Catholic Church was the main beneficiary of a decision to return church buildings seized by Frelimo militants along with the schools and hospitals which were nationalised in 1975.

Though Catholic bishops seem preoccupied with past problems, the devastating impact of Renamo violence looms much larger in the lives of average Catholics.

Among trainee priests studying at a seminary in Maputo, "only those who come from the cities don't have some relative who was killed by Renamo", said Eusebio Inocencio, a 21-year-old student from the north-western province of Tete.

Yet Inocencio's bishop, Paulo Mandlate of Tete, said he doesn't know which side — Frelimo or Renamo — is most responsible for the anti-civilian violence afflicting Mozambique.

He stressed that church-state relations are good and getting better because of the Frelimo decision to return church buildings. But when conversation turned from real estate to people, Mandlate had far less to say.

"The Mozambican people are suffering and dying," and that must stop, he said. Asked why they die and who must stop killing them, he responded "I myself don't have that information" because it isn't safe to visit the rural areas where most violence occurs.

Mandlate confines himself to the towns and other places reachable under Mozambican or Zimbabwian military escort.

Visiting places like Angonia, Inocencio's home district, is still too dangerous, he emphasised. Not so, insisted relief workers who took this reporter to that fertile highland district. About 10 000 former refugees returned there since late last year, following Frelimo military advances. A United Nations official said he asked the bishop to help find food and clothing for the former refugees, and was even willing to fly him to Angonia, but got no response.

The bishop's isolation from victims of Renamo violence may partly explain the vagueness of pastoral letters in which they repeatedly called for reconciliation between Frelimo and Renamo but failed to condemn Renamo atrocities.

This is why Mozambique poses such a dilemma for John Paul II. The government and many lay Catholics hope he will condemn Renamo as "terrorists" and South Africa as their sponsor. Yet he could, out of respect for the local hierarchy's stance of silence, confine himself to vague statements of sympathy for the victims.