

# The Problem with RENAMO

The problem with RENAMO is that this guerilla group is going around spreading death and torture, using South African money and weapons to overthrow the government of Mozambique



Sytse Tjallingii: "It has taken so long to get the word out because Mozambique is one of the poorest nations in the world." (Paul Shoul photo)

By Kris Hundley

Sytse Tjallingii is a slender bearded Dutchman who bears an urgent message from the African nation of Mozambique. It is the same message recently carried through the area by Prexy Nesbitt, a hearty black man from Chicago. Their simple, irrefutable message is this: a South African trained and funded guerilla army, known as the Mozambican National Resistance or RENAMO, is terrorizing the land, schools and clinics of this coastal nation and has murdered over 100,000 civilians in the last two years.

Bearing photos of mass graves and mutilated natives and copies of an exhaustive U.S. State Department report supporting claims of RENAMO atrocities, both men visited Western Mass. independently last month in an effort to bring greater public attention to this little-known corner of the world.

"It has taken so long to get the word out about RENAMO's massacres because Mozambique is one of the poorest nations in the world, with little communication," said Tjallingii, who has been teaching in this former Portuguese colony since 1980, just five years after the nation won its independence. "All the reporters are stationed in Johannesburg [South Africa] and it takes an event like the killing of President Samora Machel [in 1986] to get them to Maputo, Mozambique's capital. Then they're gone again."

"We have much work to do to make this a real point of concern for people here," admits Nesbitt, a former aide to Chicago's late Mayor Harold Washington who now heads the Mozambique Solidarity Office in the U.S. "Most people never get out of the path between work and home, let alone think about Africa. It's our job to help them see the connections."

Connections, Nesbitt says, such as Coors' Brewing Company's strong financial support of the ultra-conservative Heritage Foundation, which has repeatedly defended RENAMO's actions and lobbied on its behalf in Washington. Connections like RENAMO-fundraisers by TV evangelist Jimmy Swaggart in the guise of providing religious freedom for Mozambicans, whose ruling party, FRELIMO, describes itself as "pragmatic socialism." Connections like pro-RENAMO Congressman Dan Burton's (R-Indiana) strong ties to our new vice president Dan Quayle.

## WORLD WATCH

"We're very concerned about what might happen in a Bush administration because Bush talks about the need of Mozambique's government to 'dialogue' with the guerillas, when in fact the guerillas are nothing but terrorists," Nesbitt says. "We know that Washington would like to see RENAMO clean up its act, because you can't work with a group that saws off people's legs. That's why Alfonso Dhlakama, the closest thing RENAMO has to a leader, is now in South Africa, being taught how to speak to foreign journalists in preparation for a European and U.S. tour. But the State Department's report is very clear on this. RENAMO is not a locally supported political movement. It's terrorism."

The report cited by both Nesbitt and Tjallingii, whose recent visit

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was sponsored by American Friends Society, was prepared last April by Robert Gersony, a consultant to the State Department's Bureau for Refugee Programs. Gersony spent three months interviewing 200 Mozambican refugees in 25 camps in five different African nations, including Mozambique itself. Those interviewed came from 48 different districts of Mozambique, some arriving within hours of speaking with Gersony, forty-three percent having been relocated within the 11 week interview period. From this representative cross-section of Mozambican refugees, Gersony derived certain "unavoidable findings."

"First, the level of violence reported to be conducted by RENAMO against the civilian population of rural Mozambique is extraordinarily high," Gersony reported. "Roughly 170 refugees, each representing one family who arrived in 1987-'88, collectively reported about 600 murders by RENAMO of unarmed civilians in the absence of resistance or defense." On the basis of these statistics, Gersony projected that RENAMO could conservatively be held responsible for 100,000 civilian

deaths. Gersony's interviews also substantiated claims of systematic and horrific abuse by RENAMO forces, with porters routinely starved and beaten to death, young girls and women raped, and entire villages massacred by "axing, knifing, bayoneting, burning to death, forced drowning and asphyxiation."

Tjallingii, who was joined in his American tour by his wife and three children, said that although his family has not personally witnessed RENAMO's terror, there is no question of its existence. "We taught in the countryside for the first three years and in 1981, RENAMO began attacking primary schools, burning books, and killing teachers in our area," recalls Tjallingii, adding that, as a Quaker, he was confronted with the uneasy possibility of having to take up arms to defend his own school. "There was a birth clinic some 35 miles from our home which had just been built of reed and wood a few months prior. RENAMO forces came and burned the whole thing down."

Since moving to the relatively safer city of Maputo, Tjallingii says an exploding bomb has destroyed a student's home and a visit to a

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Identifying a body in a mass grave, Manjacaze massacre.

## RENAMO

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refugee camp off the coast, filled with 3,000 villagers fleeing RENAMO's destruction, only reinforced the horror. "You hear all these stories of RENAMO killing, robbing, cutting off people's ears just to scare," Tjallingii says. "It gets to the point where you don't like to ask people their stories anymore."

Tjallingii, Nesbitt (who lived in Mozambique in the late 1960s) and the State Department's report are unanimous in their belief that RENAMO's forces act out of a desire to destroy the budding independent black African nation, rather than to promote an alternative political ideology.

"It appears," Gersony wrote in his report, "that the only reciprocity provided by RENAMO for the efforts of the civilians is the possibility of remaining alive. There are virtually no reports of attempts to win the loyalty of the villagers. The refugees report virtually no effort

by RENAMO to explain to the civilians the purpose of the insurgency, its proposed program or its aspirations."

So why, the Western mind might wonder, would armed bandits slaughter parents and babies, kidnap and recruit orphaned children, destroy clinics and schools? Simple, explain Nesbitt and Tjallingii, the guerillas are being funded and promised power by South Africa, which has continued to train, equip and pay RENAMO soldiers despite a 1984 agreement to stop. Eyewitnesses have reported air and sea supply drops to RENAMO forces from South Africa and a 1985 raid on a guerilla camp by Mozambican forces uncovered detailed diaries and notes of South African assistance, including frequent visits from South Africa's assistant foreign minister.

"You have to understand South Africa's philosophy of 'destabilization,'" explains Tjallingii, referring to that white minority-controlled country's policy towards its black majority-run neighbors. "South Africa wants to create chaos and keep countries like Mozambique weak because they don't want the example of a successful black nation.

They want to prove that the white man has to be superior."

"South Africa sees its support of RENAMO as a matter of 'protecting its borders,'" says Prexy Nesbitt, who is lobbying for Mozambique here in the U.S. "But South Africa sees its borders extending all the way to northern Zaire. It's seen as all part of their 'Christian mission' to be a bulwark against Communism and there's virtually nothing they won't do."

To end the killing in Mozambique, both Tjallingii and Nesbitt urge Americans to press for passage of a sanctions bill. "South Africans look to 'John Wayne' Americans as heroes and say that they'll deal with black Africans like we dealt with our Indians," Nesbitt says. "So it's very important that we push for the complete, multilateral isolation of South Africa and its designation as a terrorist state. Because there is going to be a war in South Africa and it's going to be bloody. Every action we take here will make it less bloody."