

War hots up in midst of Nairobi talks with rebels

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MAPUTO/ As preparations for a new round of talks between Mozambican church leaders and the rebel movement Mozambique National Resistance (Renamo/MNR) get underway, Maputo is maintaining a tough stance towards the MNR both diplomatically and militarily.

On 25 August President Joaquim Chissano dismissed the MNR's 16-point plan (*SouthScan* Vol 4/32 p248) as "meaningless." The document, which was presented to the Mozambican bishops in Nairobi on the 15th, "has no significance at all," he said.

He pointed out that his government's 12-point plan, released in July (*SouthScan* Vol 4/26 p197), had won backing from African heads of state, meeting in Harare the previous week. MNR leader Afonso Dhlakama reacted strongly to Chissano's statement, claiming that Frelimo "is not ready to talk to the MNR about true peace in Mozambique."

In a radio interview broadcast in Lisbon on 29 August, Dhlakama reiterated his demand that "Frelimo must recognise the MNR as a political party," repeating that the MNR "is prepared to hold unconditional talks."

Dhlakama also emphasised that the Mozambican people should be "able to vote for the political system of their choice," apparently backtracking on the MNR's earlier acceptance, in the 16 points, of the "existing order."

In that document, the MNR made several concessions to the government's position, stating that "it is not Renamo's intention to change the existing order in Mozambique through armed force." In another phrase which echoes the language of the government's twelve points, the MNR says, without apparent irony, that it "will never agree to military force being used to impose a leadership or political options against the will of the people."

The plan states that the movement is "opposed to any act which violates the physical or moral integrity of the people, such as massacres, pillaging, etc."

It goes on to claim that as a guerrilla force, the MNR depends on the goodwill of the population.

Despite the government's hard line, the Catholic Archbishop of Maputo, Cardinal Alexandre dos Santos, left for Nairobi on the 28th for what Mozambican radio described as further contacts with "armed bandit ringleaders." An MNR demand in the 16 points had called for an end to "insulting verbal attacks", in apparent reference to the continued use of the term 'bandit' to describe them.

Travelling with the cardinal was the Presbyterian church leader Osias Mucache; the following day the Catholic Bishop of Beira, Jaime Goncalves, also left for Kenya. It was not clear when the new round of talks would begin.

Meanwhile, there are signs that the war on the ground is intensifying, according to reports published in Maputo. In one of the largest offensives launched in recent years, the Mozambican army (reportedly with Zimbabwean help) has recaptured Tambara district, in northern Manica, which had been held by the MNR for several years.

Fighting is apparently continuing in Tambara, with small MNR groups attacking positions held by the armed forces as recently as 27 August. The important base at Maringue in Sofala, close to the railway line from Beira to Malawi, has also been taken.

At the same time, the MNR mounted a series of brutal attacks throughout August, in various parts of the country. At Bilene, in Gaza on 24 August, an MNR group burned 15 houses and looted seven shops, killing 11 people.

Also in Gaza, on the 27th, over 800 civilians were reported to have fled into northern Transvaal after fierce fighting near the border town of Pafuri.

The worst incident, however, took place in early August at a village a few kilometres from Xai-Xai, the provincial capital of Gaza, where 54 civilians were hacked to death with pangas.