

# How TV helped fight the war

Behind this week's big TV feature on Renamo lay a mission — to brush up the Renamo image and deliver some expensive gifts

By CHRIS MCGREAR

**T**HE SABC has clearly done its bit to make "liberated" Mozambique safe for South African power lines.

Monday night's *Agenda* programme featured reporter Johan Kruger and cameraman Jan de Klerk, who spent nine days inside Renamo-held territory.

I was one of several other reporters who joined them, and gradually discovered that the TV crew were men with a mission.

As we boarded the small plane that dumped us at an airstrip close to Renamo headquarters in Mozambique's central Gorongosa region, we were struck by the enormous amount of equipment the SABC men had brought along with them, but we simply attributed it to the burdens of television.

Renamo leader Alfonso Dhlakama soon gave the game away. He arrived for a midnight dinner in his mud-and-thatch headquarters fitted out in a spanking-new uniform still showing the folds from the packaging.

It was, we later learnt, among a number of gifts to Dhlakama, including \$20 000 worth of radio and navigation equipment. Exactly who had brought them in was unclear, but the purpose behind them was not. The South African power company, Eskom, needed a favour from the rebel leader ... and the SABC was on hand to play its part.

When Dhlakama arrived, the conversation turned to his view that a huge conspiracy had turned the world against him. Renamo's responsibility for the slaughter of Mozambique's population was dismissed as propaganda. Even Margaret Thatcher had been duped into backing the Marxist Frelimo government, he said.

Cameraman Jan de Klerk, FW's nephew, offered the proposition that Renamo really occupied 80 percent of Mozambique, a figure Dhlakama readily accepted. But it was Johan Kruger who showed real enthusiasm. He criticised the South African government's aid to Frelimo, assured Dhlakama that Renamo was gravely misunderstood, and then offered this glimmer of hope:

"We wonder why we were allowed to come here. We are from the SABC and we came openly and no one told us we shouldn't come. We've been working on this for six months. Pik Botha personally knows we were coming and he did nothing about it. Maybe they've had a change of heart."

Johan also wondered why I had been allowed to come along. "With due respect to my other colleagues here," he said, "perhaps if only South African journalists were at this table, we could do more to help you."

Help? More? Kruger was not to be restrained by the presence of other reporters, he was clearly on a mission.

The official mission, it transpired, was to get the rebel leader to stop blowing up power lines from the Cahora Bassa hydro-electric dam to South Africa. Kruger's personal crusade was to show the world Renamo for what it was — a peace-loving, educational organisation.



Cameraman Jan De Klerk, nephew of the president and Renamo enthusiast

With a peace settlement in the offing in Mozambique, Eskom is keen to resurrect the Cahora Bassa power lines. But the foreigners asked to sink \$200 million into the project were less than content with a verbal assurance given by Dhlakama to Eskom's corporate secretary, Dries Loots. Loots confirmed that the SABC was on hand in Gorongosa to get a commitment on camera and reassure the investors that Renamo would refrain from attacking the pylons and work crews.

Seated next to Dhlakama was a former member of Britain's SAS, now resident in Johannesburg, Garth Barrett. He was there on behalf of Eskom, to ensure it was the right kind of commitment.

At the next day's press conference, Kruger got the first question in and made a startling revelation.

"I can tell you that there are very powerful financial interests in the world who are ready with the necessary financing for the reconstruction of the power line. But they need a categorical assurance from yourself that you will allow the people to come in

and do the work, and that you will protect them and protect the line afterwards," he said.

Dhlakama said he saw no problem. But there was a problem. Saying he saw no problem was not a solid enough commitment.

At a second sitting, the leader posed in front of Renamo's new flag, with the label "Made in the USA. Remove before displaying" still in place. Kruger repeated the question and turned to Garth Barrett. Was that good enough? Yes, but Barrett wanted Dhlakama to repeat something he had mentioned yesterday.

"The leader the other day said he would be happy to invite the ministers. I think that if you could bring that out ..." Kruger obliged and Dhlakama invited representatives of the South African, Portuguese and Mozambican governments to come and receive assurances personally. Kruger had his "scoop".

The SABC then proceeded to follow a Zimbabwe-born evangelist known as Ellie on her crusade to local communities, and at the same time show

the human side of Renamo.

"Because of the propaganda campaign, people think Renamo is nothing more than a bunch of bandits. That's why it's so important that we show a white woman walking through the bush without anything happening to her," Kruger assured Dhlakama.

Had anything happened to Ellie, it would have been a miracle. Accompanied by a large contingent of Renamo soldiers, two American academics, a German cameraman, this reporter and the SABC, the evangelist set off on her mission.

A 40km march took us to the village of Khanda, in Renamo's administrative headquarters. The news was good. The next day there would be a thousand Christians waiting to hear Ellie speak. Later in the day there would be a Catholic service. Kruger dismissed the idea of filming Catholics until, to his and Ellie's horror, the following morning the thousand worshippers turned out to be Zionists who had never heard of Jesus. The Catholics were back in the script.

More than Christians were needed, though. This was Renamo territory and people were happy. In a starving land, it seemed a good idea to have some pictures of people harvesting. Sugar-cane cutters were rounded up and once they were at work, Kruger decided they should look happy. Having got them looking more or less happy, he then decided there should be some happy chatting. The chatting was arranged. Even the evangelist groaned.

But a good Christian's work is never done, Kruger reminded us, and on we went to a school where 600 very expectant children were gathered. They were encouraged to chant the alphabet, and Johan was recorded standing in their midst wondering why the world would not help these little children. The evangelist had decided to help by bringing along a dozen notebooks and pens, and a stack of religious literature.

All this was duly seen on the SABC, but viewers were deprived of the riot that ensued when there was not enough to go around. The children started hitting their teachers in frantic attempts to get their hands on a pamphlet extolling the virtues of discovering Jesus. Most of the pamphlets were quickly discarded.

Later in the day a promise of clothes drew 3 000 people to a Renamo political meeting in Khanda. The meeting fared little better than the gathering at the school. Women with babies were to receive priority, so they sat through Renamo's rambling lecture in the driving rain and dutifully worked through the songs in praise of Dhlakama. When the clothing finally appeared, they tore into the sacks with a desperation the soldiers could not control. The distribution was abandoned and the remaining 20 sacks sent to individual churches to hand out. This too was missing from SABC screens.

But Kruger was pleased. He had spent a week making promises on behalf of himself, the SABC and South Africa's white population. "We're going back from here with a lot of information, and we're here to see if we can do a few things for you," he assured Dhlakama.

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