

Renamo rebels mutilate civilians

By KARL MAIER: Maputo

WEARING a faded green shirt with dried blood stains around its collar, Rodrigues Laice sat on a hospital bed and recalled Santane's last order: "Go and show your ears to your president, Chissano."

With those words, a platoon commander of the Mozambique National Resistance (Renamo) rebels sent Laice (43), his wife Olinda Francisco (32), and another man running off into the bush without their ears and with deep knife wounds across the bridge of their noses. Earlier that day, the rebels had mutilated two elderly men.

"He said we could not return without a sign," Laice told *The Weekly Mail*.

The mutilations were carried out by several boys, eight to nine years old, wielding penknives, Laice said.

While Renamo leader Afonso Dhlakama has repeatedly denied that his 20 000-strong guerrilla army resorts to mutilations of civilians, there have been hundreds of documented cases of such abuses, in the central

provinces of Sofala, Manica and Tete.

Laice and his neighbours were recent victims of a stepped up Renamo offensive in southern Mozambique which coincided with the sixth round of Italian-mediated talks in Rome to negotiate an end to the 16-year-old war.

From May 3 to May 8 alone, there were at least five incidents on the road, with 16 people being murdered in one attack about 100km north of Maputo.

The upsurge of ambushes was aided in large measure by the army's decision to withdraw an elite commando unit, known as the Red Berets, in April, after reports that the soldiers had gone on strike for lack of pay and rations.

Laice was one of 10 residents of Ndavela village on the outskirts of Maputo abducted on May 8 by a Renamo platoon of 17 soldiers, at least 12 of them mere boys. "There were five adults, and the rest were children," said Francisco. "They all had AK-47s and a few had uniforms."

They were marched north until they reached a rebel-controlled zone of Mi-

chafutene, about 30km north of Maputo, the next day. When two elderly men complained that they could not keep up, several boys were ordered to chop off their ears and lips and then release them.

The three adults, including Laice, who completed the march were let go the next day minus their ears, while the rebels kept five young boys whom they picked up in the raid.

One 49-year-old woman who was allowed to leave said that, before departing, the adults were given a lecture by a Renamo commander about why the rebels had committed the massacre.

"We are not bandits, we are your brothers. Those ruling in Maputo know who we are," the woman recalled the rebel commander as saying. "We want to eat too, but they just want to eat alone. That massacre we carried out to show that Frelimo is nothing. If they do not accept to eat with us, there will be nothing too. We will make war until there is nothing left but Frelimo and Renamo."

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