

From ROBIN HALLETT

"IT IS usual in Africa to negotiate while fighting because the government is never a voluntary party to the negotiations. We cannot abandon the armed struggle." The words are those of Afonso Dhlakama, leader of Renamo or the National Resistance Movement which has been engaged in an "armed struggle" against Mozambique's Frelimo government since the late '70s.

To anyone concerned about the future of one of the most cruelly treated countries in the world Dhlakama's words add a feeling of angry exasperation to a steadily mounting sense of despair.

Not fruitless

Negotiations between Renamo and Frelimo have been going on, with frequent interruptions, since July 1990. Their venue is Rome, because it was an Italian aid charity which played an important part in bringing the two sides together.

The negotiations have not been entirely fruitless. In December 1990 Renamo agreed to put a halt to its attacks on the rail-lines, one from Beira, the other from Maputo, that connect Zimbabwe with the sea.

In return Frelimo had to concede that the 7 000 Zimbabwean troops stationed in the country and highly effective in counter-insurgency operations, should in future be confined to guarding the two rail corridors.

A Joint Verification Commission, made up of representatives of the two sides with observers from eight other countries including Britain, was set up to monitor this mini-ceasefire.

Attacks increase

In November 1991 two protocols were signed, the terms of which implied that Renamo was now prepared to accept the legitimacy of the Frelimo government in return for an assurance from Frelimo that when eventually free elections should take place, then the former rebels would be allowed to carry on their political campaign without any hindrance.

But still Renamo goes on fighting, stepping up in late November its attacks on the suburbs of Maputo and Beira.

It launched, too, in the latter half of 1991 a significant counter-attack in Zambezia and Namapula, two central provinces where Renamo's position was being undermined by the success of a remarkable grass-roots movement, a peasant militia known as Namparana whose leader, Manuel Alfonso, was believed to have risen from the dead and to have the power through a magical form of vaccination of conferring invulnerability on his followers.

Little ideology

The Namparana militia was armed only with spears: Renamo sent it its best-equipped guer-

rillas to teach them the folly of their ways.

Renamo is reckoned to have control over about a third of the country and to be able to operate freely in another third. So why does it still go on fighting?

The movement has never been strong on ideology. But in spite of its shady origins — without massive support from first Rhodesian, then South African military intelligence, it might never have got off the ground — it served as some sort of focus of opposition to the Frelimo government.

Many Mozambicans had reason to hate Frelimo. The Portuguese settlers who lost so much when they fled the country in 1975, the black Mozambicans who had collaborated wholeheartedly with the Portuguese, the traditional chiefs who owed their prestige in large measure to Portuguese support, the peasants who were moved from their old holdings to state farms or compact villages, the Frelimo party members who were dismissed for corruption or felt that liberation had not brought them the rewards they expected — all these had good reasons for turning against Frelimo.

In its rhetoric and in its early policies Frelimo, with massive backing from Eastern Bloc countries, pursued a rigorously Marxist-Leninist line.

So it made good sense for Renamo to bang the anti-communist drum and to proclaim its adherence to genuine democracy and a free-market economy.

Economic change

But by 1990, with the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, Frelimo found itself entirely dependent on the charity of Western aid donors. The winds of change were once again blowing through Africa. The party responded to them by changing the constitution, abandoning Marxism-Leninism and the one-party state and making provision for a system of multi-party democracy.

Similar changes were introduced in the sphere of the economy. By 1990 Mozambique was becoming the sort of country

that Renamo rhetoric had always called for.

So why does Renamo still go on fighting? Only, it would seem because the movement is anxious to extend its control over as large an area as possible, so when elections are eventually held it can be sure of gaining enough seats in the National Assembly to make it impossible for any government to operate without its support.

For the young men, many of them still only in their teens, who form Renamo's rank and file, that is far too sophisticated an argument. They have learnt through brutal first-hand experience that power grows from the barrel of a gun.

The terribly lethal weapons that they carry give them both status and access to the meagre wealth their society affords. Why should they not continue this life of semi-banditry for ever?

Ceasefire

In Angola it was pressure from Washington and Moscow that forced the MPLA and Unita to agree to make peace. But no government in the world admits to supporting Renamo. Its backers are private individuals in Portugal, South Africa, the United States and other countries who must expect to be rewarded for their support by lucrative concessions should Renamo ever come to power.

It looks as if no outsider will ever be able to force Renamo to make peace. And even if the movement's loosely structured high command agreed to a country-wide ceasefire, would it ever be able to enforce such a decision on its scattered and self-willed followers?

"The overwhelming sound of rural Mozambique is of children coughing," wrote an English journalist, Chris MacGreal, after travelling in the country last year. "Fewer than half the children," he added, "make it to adulthood."

There in the dying children is the essence of Mozambique's agony. But do they ever hear and ponder on the sound — the coughing of dying children — all those concession-hunters and arms dealers who have tried manipulating Mozambique for their own profit?

Agony goes on in one of world's neglected backyards