

Deep in Renamo's nerve-centre

THE hidden headquarters of the Renamo rebels is a well-ordered camp that seems a far cry from the brutal atrocities for which the rebels are blamed elsewhere in Mozambique. HAMILTON WENDE reports for the Africa News Service from Gorongosa.

IT'S LIKE a scene out of a "Star Wars"-type fantasy. Rebel soldiers go screaming through narrow forest lanes on Honda scramblers.

The action takes place deep in the forest in the Sofala province of central Mozambique at the Gorongosa headquarters of Renamo leader Afonso Dhlakama.

Renamo's headquarters is a well laid-out camp, with the huts of the 400 or so workers and soldiers spaced out along the footpaths that wind through the trees.

Dhlakama's complex at the centre consists of an office, his personal quarters, a row of comfortable huts for visitors and a kitchen compound.

Deeper in the forest is a small parade ground, a church, a small clinic, a tailor's shop, an information centre with a hand-cranked copying machine and old typewriters — all well hidden under the forest canopy.

The Renamo soldiers are ragged and dressed in whatever clothes they can find. Many are young women, who are generally better dressed than the men. All carry battered AK-47 rifles and often a half-bag of mealie meal or a bundle of personal



officer passes them, they snap to attention.

THE LEADER: Renamo commander-in-chief Afonso Dhlakama.

There is no evidence of recent South African aid. A few soldiers are wearing unbelievably old and shredded Rhodesian army-pattern camouflage shirts.

The camp has six Honda 200 scramblers that the president and the senior officers use for transport — when there is fuel available.

When I ask where Renamo gets its arms and ammunition, the standard answer is that they are captured from Frelimo.

About the motorbikes Dhlakama is vague, but the next day three missionaries from right-wing protestant churches in SA are flown in, and one, an ex-Rhodesian, tells me he brought spares for them.

About 6 km away in the forest is Dhlakama Central Hospital — a cluster of long, thatched huts.

The 32 beds of the hospital are made of tree branches and reeds, and the one "operating theatre" has an operating table made of the same, with a single Sabax drip hanging from the thatched roof and a sheet of plastic acting as a skylight for illumination. A few wooden shelves hold a paltry selection of instruments and medicines.

I am told that, with the exception of a few visits from the Red Cross, no major aid agencies will work in Renamo-held areas.

We are also shown Military Academy No 3 — a collection of thatched huts with students attending lectures in military intelligence and logistics.

During a training display given for our benefit by a group of about 25 Renamo soldiers, the most striking thing is how battered the troops' rifles are and how often they jam — usually after every second or third shot.

Renamo does not deny that it used to get aid from Rhodesia and South Africa.

The ruinous state of their weapons suggested to me that perhaps this official aid really has stopped, and that they may well be capturing the weapons and ammunition they use from Frelimo and perhaps getting some others from private sympathisers in southern Africa.

The next day, riding pillion on the motorbikes, we roar behind Dhlakama to a political meeting at an outlying village some 20 km away, out in the open savannah. Despite the drought, the area has plenty of sorghum fields, a few vegetable patches, mango and banana trees.

The people inhabiting the area are desperately poor — I saw at least three

ped around their bodies — but they are no worse off

than in Frelimo-controlled areas.

About 2 000 people gathered in the centre of a small cluster of huts applaud Dhlakama's arrival. They sing, dance and play music. Dhlakama briefly joins the dancers, grinning broadly, before making a speech in Portuguese, translated into the local dialect.

He speaks on multi-party democracy and the need for private ownership of land, about freedom of speech and of the press, about the importance of an independent judiciary. At points in his speech the villagers break into clapping or ululating, but there is no real enthusiasm that I can see.

It is hard to interpret a meeting like this as real support for Renamo. Clearly it has been arranged for our benefit. A poverty-stricken, drought-beleaguered populace living in the heart of Renamo-held territory can hardly be expected not to turn up for a political gathering organised by Renamo. They certainly are not likely to show any signs of dissent.

On the other hand, driving through the territory on motorbikes it is clear that the local population are not scared of Renamo.

In the end, the visit left me with too many unanswered questions.

I went there — hope-



TRAINING EXERCISE: A Renamo fighter aims his AK-47 rifle at an imaginary enemy.

fully with an open mind — willing to be convinced, if it is indeed the case, that Renamo is a legitimate rebel movement with real political aims and genuine sup-

port among the Mozambican people.

To dismiss them as mere bandits is simplistic. There is clearly some level of discipline

and their operations are not entirely random.

Renamo also controls significant territory, and from all accounts the population in the areas

is well treated.

But there can be no doubt that human rights violations are occurring on a massive scale in Mozambique. Stories of brutal massacres; of

senseless and inconceivably cruel mutilations of men, women and children; of human targets being used for training young Renamo soldiers who are barely older than children, filter through constantly.

The sources are varied: refugees, Western aid workers, journalists, international observers.

Dhlakama is frank about why he allows the fighting to continue: "It is the only reason Frelimo is negotiating seriously with us."

I ask him about the accounts of atrocities. He grows quite agitated. "It is Frelimo that has committed atrocities, not Renamo," he says. "Sometimes civilians get caught in the crossfire, but Renamo has never done those things. It's all Frelimo propaganda."

All of it? How can he prove this?

"The elections will show that," he says. "They will prove that Renamo is the true representative of the people."

For now, that is the best answer we are likely to get.