

Southern Africa News Features

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HUNGER STALKS RENAMO IN RURAL MOZAMBIQUE

by David Martin in Maputo

Forces of the Mozambique National Resistance (MNR or Renamo) inside Mozambique were demoralized and deserting in consequential numbers when the peace protocols were signed in Rome on 4 October, Western military attaches here say.

According to one attache, Renamo armed forces probably numbered little more than 9,000 at the time. Among these were boys aged only 12 who had been issued with guns and taught to kill.

Another, who put the numbers a little higher, said he believes that over 50 percent of Renamo armed forces are under 16 years of age, too young for military service.

He added that, in recent months, Renamo groups of 20 people usually included a maximum of four adults. The remainder were aged 14 to 18.

Despite a spate of mutinies by units of the Mozambican army over pay arrears and other conditions, the military attaches believe the regular forces have acquitted themselves better since the middle of the year.

In particular, they cite the performance of the 1 and 2 Commando units and the British-trained 9th Brigade. In part, they say, these were responsible for Renamo's demoralisation.

"Renamo's morale was very poor because they couldn't hold any consequential real estate they took. The government forces would counter-attack driving them out. Most saw they were making no real gain in the war."

But even more important was the devastating drought which has hit Mozambique and much of southern Africa. It is the worst since records were started and has turned fertile lands into deserts.

If there was any victor in this war which has ebbed and flowed across the country for 16 years accounting for over one million lives it is the drought and not the military protagonists.

Military attaches who met Renamo members who had been captured or surrendered in recent months said they were told their mission was to obtain food and medicines, not to fight.

"Many had begun to age prematurely. Fourteen-year-olds looked as if they were in their mid-twenties. Thirty-year-olds looked sixty," said one military attache. "Some were so weak from hunger that when they tried to run away from an ambush they dropped their guns, collapsed and were easily captured."

Despite the state of the Renamo army, the attache stressed that he did not believe the government forces could have won an outright victory militarily. "At the end both armies were war weary and Renamo was bloody hungry," he added.

Around the middle of the year, as the drought cut deep scars across Mozambique south of the Zambezi River threatening three million people, Renamo commanders ordered their forces not to bring hostages, whom they used as porters for their loot, back to their zones.

The Renamo forces did not have enough food for themselves and simply could not feed the people they abducted. Increasingly, the abductees fled the Renamo zones and there appears to have been little attempt to stop them.

Renamo leader, Afonso Dhlakama, claims to control 80 per cent of Mozambique's 800,000 square kilometres which he calls "liberated zones". This is dismissed as nonsense by Western diplomats here.

"At most he controls five, maybe 10, of Mozambique's districts," said one military attache. Another thought he might control 20 to 25 per cent of the countryside because no government administration existed in those areas.

The demoralisation of his forces and the flight of civilians from Renamo areas presents Dhlakama with two immediate problems.

The first is that the Rome protocols commit Renamo to providing 50 per cent of the 30,000 personnel for the new army, air force and navy. They simply do not have the numbers and the skills of the armed forces are very limited.

In Rome, one military attache watched a 32-year-old Renamo General sitting with his arms folded across his chest, his hands hidden under his arms. Finally he approached the General and realised most of his fingers on one hand were missing and the other was badly mutilated. The General explained he had been trying to lay two anti-tank mines but he had only one detonator. So he cut it in half!

Renamo had argued in Rome for a 15,000-man army and no air force or navy. Their reason was that they felt they could find only 7,500 people for the army and had no one skilled enough to enter the air force or navy.

Finally Dhlakama's commanders told him that he should agree only to a partial accord and should ensure they had good jobs. "It is the top jobs they are now looking for because they know they do not have the numbers or skills," a military attache said.

Dhlakama's second problem is the size of the population in his areas. The land size is irrelevant in an election and most diplomats believe that 85 per cent of the population are now living in government-controlled areas with 15 per cent at most in Renamo areas.

Incidents since the ceasefire further illustrate the misery in the Renamo zones. On separate occasions in the central Zambezia province, Renamo forces contacted the local government authorities asking for food. In the northern Cabo Delgado province, a group of Renamo soldiers and abductees surrendered to the authorities because they were starving. This pattern is being repeated elsewhere in the country.

However, to bolster their flagging forces inside the country Renamo has infiltrated a large number of men trained in Kenya through Malawi. For the moment they are on the offensive in central Mozambique.

This could not have been done without the knowledge of Dhlakama who knows little of Mozambique other than the centre of the country where Rhodesian intelligence initially planted the rebel force in 1976 and it is questionable how much he is in touch with his own and Mozambique's realities today.

"He is a bit like Hitler at the end of the Second World War," said one military attache. "Nobody dares tell him the bad news for fear of what will happen to them and he is isolated from the truth." (SARDC)

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