

Chissano says stop

FROM OUR MOZAMBIQUE CORRESPONDENT

WITH his country in ruins and a third of his people near starvation, Mozambique's President Joaquim Chissano is trying to make peace. His FRELIMO party won independence in 1975, after ten years of war. Since then it has been fighting the rebels of the Mozambique National Resistance (RENAMO). Mozambique, bone-poor under Portugal, is now poorer still, with an average income in 1987 of \$150 a year. Corruption is spreading, prices soar and the army's morale is near rock bottom. Even hardliners on the ten-man politburo have accepted, however grudgingly, that military victory over the rebels is impossible.

Is peace impossible too? Mr Chissano believes he has persuaded South Africa's government to drop its support for RENAMO, and to clamp down on the rebels' unofficial supporters. He may be right: the South Africans badly want to build on the goodwill they have earned by promising independence to Namibia. It will be far more difficult to get the rebels' amorphous leadership to change course and stick to it. RENAMO was invented in the 1970s by the white government of Rhodesia to wreak havoc in the country, which it does with singular brutality. Some doubt whether it is capable of doing anything else.

So far Mr Chissano's overtures to the rebels have been indirect. With his approval, Roman Catholic and Anglican clergymen have been meeting since November with RENAMO people in Kenya, to ask their price for peace. The talks move slowly, because the rebel side is split into more than a dozen tiny factions. So far no RENAMO commanders from inside Mozambique have attended the negotiations, which makes some Mozambicans wonder whether they will achieve anything. In the meantime the president holds public meetings in the provinces, to prepare opinion for national reconciliation. At one such meeting—in the southern town of Manhica in April—he claimed to have received a message from the rebels saying that they accepted him as president.

In December 1987, a year after he took power, President Chissano announced an amnesty for the rebels. It was extended last year, with moderate success: so far more than 3,000 RENAMO fighters have drifted in from the bush. But it has made little difference to the ferocity of the war. Mr Chissano refuses to discuss RENAMO's grievances before it lays down its arms, renounces violence and accepts the Mozambican constitution—which is still being revised.

It looks like a stalemate. Yet many of the rebels' grievances, in so far as they are identifiable, are being attended to. RENAMO says it wants a multi-party system. Mr Chissano's promises in that direction are still vague, but his government has at least transferred

power to elect the president from his party's central committee to the Popular Assembly, in which a few non-FRELIMO members already have seats. The rebels also say they want more religious freedom and a free-market economy. The government has granted the first freedom and is seeking to establish the second. It has built strong relations with the West, and especially with Britain, which helps train its army. Most of Russia's military advisers are going home, along with their belief in central planning.

The government's economic reforms, supported by the International Monetary Fund, have got the economy growing at 4% a year. But much of the hope for recovery depends on Mozambique's southern neighbour. Last year South Africa promised to help repair the vast dam at Cahora Bassa, which would provide both countries with cheap electricity. It has also lent 6m rand (\$2m) to rehabilitate the port of Maputo, which serves South African citrus and coal exporters well. The South African trade mission in the capital is doing brisk work: Maputo's shops are full of goods, including Coca-Cola cans which say "Keep South Africa Tidy" on the top.

Still, little has improved for the four-fifths of Mozambicans who live in the countryside. The previous president, Samora Machel, herded peasants into communal villages, caring nothing for their belief that the spirits of ancestors reside in the land. Mr Chissano is trying to win back their loyalty by offering families plots of land which they are not allowed to sell but which they can at least hand on to their children. Even so, many peasants seek refuge in the cities, where they discover that, thanks to the economic reforms, food is no longer subsidised.

Meanwhile the war sputters on. The rebels are on the offensive in the southern province of Maputo, and for the past three months the 30,000-strong army has performed miserably. A reorganisation in 1987 failed to revive its fighting spirit: young officers are frustrated by older generals, some of whom are accused of profiteering. Most soldiers go hungry and short of the weapons they need to fight properly. Peace, still distant, is already long overdue.