

Mozambique

Inch by inch

Economist

12/8/89

FROM OUR EAST AFRICA CORRESPONDENT

THE fighters may be turning into talkers. Their contacts, in the safety of Kenya, are still indirect. After 14 years of horrific civil war it seems a small achievement. But recent changes in the Mozambican capital, Maputo, could soon turn it into something more than that.

First a group of Renamo rebels, including their elusive leader Mr Afonso Dhlakama, appeared in Nairobi. There followed a delegation of government-blessed church leaders from Mozambique; then came Mr Robert Mugabe, the president of Zimbabwe. Mr Mugabe and the Kenyan president, Mr Daniel arap Moi, announced that the Mozambican groups would begin negotiations, and praised each side's good intent. With that, the curtain fell.

Behind it, the Renamo men and the Mozambican clergymen were secretly talking. This is as close as the rebels and Mozambique's ruling Frelimo movement have yet come to discussing peace. There is no warmth yet; but earlier and even more secret attempts to start negotiations were far slower-moving.

The Nairobi talks-about-talks came soon after President Joaquim Chissano of Mozambique made his opening public bid. In July he told his ruling party's first national congress in five years that the war had killed perhaps 700,000 of Mozambique's 15m people and turned another 1.6m into refugees. National output is about a quarter what it was when the Portuguese, not noted

for running prosperous colonies, pulled out in 1975. About a third of the country's people survive on food aid from abroad.

Having marshalled those dire facts, Mr Chissano emerged from the congress with the party's endorsement for his peace initiative. That mainly seemed to involve a pledge to open talks with the rebels—but only, the president insisted, after Renamo has renounced violence. Therein may lie the rub. Renamo insists it will agree to a ceasefire only after arrangements are in place for power-sharing and free elections. Mr Chissano has given no indication that he is prepared to grant either, though he talks of an opportunity for former “bandits” to take part in public life.

Mozambique's government is coerced by its own chronic penury. For its part, Renamo must be anxious about continuation of the foreign, allegedly South African, support that has sustained it. Both sides may therefore persevere in seeking a solution. At its congress Frelimo, once the self-styled “vanguard party”, formally shed its commitment to Marxism-Leninism. This should suit the rebels, who have long condemned communism. Frelimo has found the flexibility to endorse some elements of free-market economics. Perhaps, these days, it is non-doctrinaire about negotiations too.
