

Optimism for Mozambique peace

Peter Biles in Nairobi and Paul Fauvet in Maputo

FOUR days of talks in Nairobi on how to end the civil war in Mozambique have left observers cautiously optimistic about progress in the peace initiative.

But as the talks proceeded, it emerged in Maputo that a joint force of Mozambican and Zimbabwean soldiers had seized the headquarters of the South African-backed rebels of the Mozambique National Resistance (MNR).

A military statement announcing the capture of the headquarters, in Maringue in the central province of Sofala, also said that five other nearby camps were taken with the deaths of 104 MNR members. The operation to storm the headquarters took place in July and the statement confirmed rumours that have been circu-

lating in Maputo for more than two weeks.

The exploratory peace talks are being led by a delegation of four Mozambican church leaders, including the Archbishop of Maputo, Cardinal Alexandre José Maria dos Santos, which has been meeting a group of top officials from the MNR, which is also known as Renamo.

It is understood that the two sides reached no agreement, but these are being seen only as preliminary talks that could pave the way for more substantial discussions in the near future.

Commentators have been encouraged by the fact that the talks did not break down. A similar meeting between the church leaders and the MNR was to have taken place in Nairobi in late July, but the MNR delegation from Lisbon failed to attend.

The churchmen came to Nairobi this week with the full

blessing of Frelimo, the Mozambique Government, and are believed to have outlined the details of a 12-point peace plan to the MNR rebels.

This is understood to have included a call on the MNR for "an immediate end to all acts of banditry and terrorism." The rebels apparently did not reject the peace plan, but are thought to have been unhappy at the suggestion that they alone have been responsible for the violence in Mozambique.

The MNR delegation, which included the rebel movement's leader, Mr Afonso Dhlakama, has apparently accepted the mediation role being played by the Kenyan President, Mr Daniel arap Moi. It has also been learned that President Moi met Mr Dhlakama during the week, even though Kenyan officials said last weekend that this was unlikely to happen.

It is not clear what the MNR's attitude is towards Mr Moi's

joint mediator in the peace effort, President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe. Mr Mugabe has committed 12,000 Zimbabwean soldiers to help Mozambique protect its strategically important road and rail links from rebel attacks.

In a statement from their Lisbon headquarters on Thursday, the MNR made a new call on Zimbabwe and Tanzania to remove their troops from Mozambique as a first step towards ending the civil war.

An MNR spokesman, Mr Manuel Frank, also said: "We want to negotiate directly with Frelimo, but we still don't know exactly who we are dealing with." This appears to have been a reference to the Mozambican church leaders who have been acting as intermediaries on behalf of the government in Maputo.

This week's Nairobi talks were conducted in an atmosphere of obsessive secrecy.