

# Church leaders in bid for peace in Mozambique

Sept - OCT 1989

HARARE - While Mozambican church leaders returned back to Maputo on talks in Nairobi with representatives of the anti-government force Renamo, the 14-year-old war against the South African-backed insurgents was intensifying on the ground.

Though the first tentative church efforts to mediate began more than a year before the Nairobi meeting, the atmosphere for such involvement was improved by the late July decision by the ruling party Frelimo to remove the last vestige of an old system which, though not strictly enforced in recent years, theoretically restricted political participation by religious leaders.

Moving to heal conflicts with the church and bring religious leaders into a peace process, the government was acting partly on advice from the Nicaraguan government, said a source close to the Mozambican government.

The talks, Mozambican church leaders presented the Renamo delegation with the government's 12-point peace plan,

made public by President Joaquim Chissano in Maputo in mid-July.

The 10-point Renamo counter proposal demanded an end to 'insulting' verbal attacks, presumably a reference to repeated reports from Mozambican officials, foreign diplomats, church leaders, and relief workers that the group has systematically murdered and mutilated unarmed civilians.

Its document also asserted that Renamo opposes 'any act which violates the people's physical or moral integrity, such as massacres, pillaging, etc.'

Last year, however, a top US government official estimated that Renamo had murdered at least 100 000 unarmed civilians in the previous 18 months of its brutal war of terror against innocent Mozambican civilians.

US officials have repeatedly charged that South Africa, despite its denials, provides Renamo continuing military aid.

Ex-Portuguese colonialists and a few of the more extreme groups on the American religious and secular right have also funnelled aid to Renamo.

Despite Renamo's self-description as a 'political force which is active on the Mozambican scene', most independent observers agree the group was founded by white security men from Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), and subsequently taken over by Pretoria.

Through talks are still in a delicate preliminary stage, church negotiators may have exerted pressure for the exclusion of external backers of Renamo from the peace process. Rebel representatives and spokesmen in Lisbon and Washington, many of them whites and holders of Western passports, were recently removed from leadership positions at a Renamo meeting held deep in the bush in central Mozambique.

As talks proceeded, the fighting heated up. According to government reports, its forces, in one of their largest offensives in recent years, recaptured the district of Tambara, held by Renamo for several years, and the important base at Maringue in Sofala province, near the Beira-Malawi railway line. A Renamo communique protested bombing raids it ascribed to the air force of neighbouring Zimbabwe, Mozambique's main military ally.

## A NEW ROUND

At the same time, Renamo was charged with mounting a new round of savage anti-civilian attacks around the country which would call into question the sincerity of its Nairobi delegation.

A few days before the church officials arrived in Nairobi for the talks, the Frelimo congress voted to open party membership not only to believers, but to property owners, polygamists, and other formerly excluded social categories.

Mozambique's government maintains generally cordial relations with minority denominations but has frequently found itself in conflict with the Roman Catholic Church, the largest grouping of Christians in the country.

At independence, anti-clerical feeling among party militants was at its height. The Roman Catholic Church in Mozambique had tended to function as an arm of the Portuguese state.

Under the colonial system, its bishops - apart from a rebellious handful - were effectively state functionaries, paid by the government. Frelimo's founders included other Christians who had suffered religious discrimination at the hands of colonial Roman Catholicism.

Seek Oct 1989