

Renamo leader ready for face-to-face peace talks

THE short fleshy man walking into the hotel room hardly looked a rebel in his dark blue suit and thick glasses, let alone the leader of what many say is one of the world's most brutal guerrilla movements, the Mozambique National Resistance (Renamo).

These days, however, Afonso Dhlakama, 36, is more often in east African hotels and airports than in his bush headquarters, as he emerges into the light of a diplomatic effort to stop the war in Mozambique. He believes that after 12 years of fighting, his dream of direct negotiations with President Joaquim Chissano's Frelimo government is within reach.

The peace process, which raised hopes when it was launched by Mr Chissano in July, has bogged down over the past three months, with both sides making demands the other would not accept, the main one being mutual recognition. In the meantime, the fighting between Frelimo's poorly-equipped army and Mr Dhlakama's 20,000-strong rebel force has continued, and the ranks of those threatened by famine swollen beyond five million.

However, Mr Dhlakama said in an interview that there was a breakthrough on 8 December when the two mediators, Presidents Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe and Daniel arap Moi of Kenya, met in Nairobi, and urged both sides to drop preconditions.

After 12 years, both sides in Mozambique's civil war are preparing to negotiate. The guerrillas' leader, Afonso Dhlakama, told Karl Maier why

While Mr Dhlakama still rejected Mr Mugabe as a mediator in the conflict because of the 7,000 Zimbabwean troops fighting Renamo in central and southern Mozambique, he was clearly pleased with the agreement. "You can't forget Mugabe is one of the pillars holding up Frelimo," he said in rapid Portuguese. "If Mugabe says there is no need to have recognition [for negotiations to take place], I am very satisfied."

Direct talks would mark stage three of the sluggish peace effort. Meetings between senior Mozambican clergymen and rebel leaders in Nairobi in 1988-89 started a process to bring Frelimo and Renamo to the bargaining table. Kenya and Zimbabwe took over in October.

Since then, there has been deadlock over Renamo's refusal to recognise the constitution and the state, as Mr Chissano demands. "We would have to say: 'Look, Frelimo must recognise Afonso Dhlakama as president of the Mozambique National Resistance, which opposes Marxism in Mozambique,'" he said, chuckling. "I do not think they are going to do something like that."

While much wrangling is expected over the agenda for the talks, both sides agree the crucial mechanisms to end the war are revision of the constitution and elections. But they differ on how to achieve this. Frelimo insists on a one-party state, which has existed since independence in 1975, while Renamo demands election of a constituent assembly and a multi-party system, although Mr Dhlakama says this is negotiable.

For the rebels, such talks would represent recognition, something that has always eluded Mr Dhlakama. He fought with Frelimo in the independence war, but later defected. Rhodesian security agents, who said they created Renamo to spy on Zimbabwean guerrillas based in Mozambique in the mid-1970s, did not rate him highly.

Mr Dhlakama thinks most of the world is against him. "We are no different to Unita and other movements fighting Marxism in their countries," he said.

Renamo is isolated because of two principal allegations. It is believed to be run by South African military intelligence and to commit atrocities against civilians. Mr Dhlakama denies both of these

charges. "In the history of guerrilla warfare it is impossible to be with the people while making life difficult for them," he said. Renamo controlled the country, he said. He also maintained that "all the roads are blocked. The railways try to work, but they don't work at even 50 per cent. Almost everything is paralysed."

The picture of Renamo which Mr Dhlakama paints is of a movement with widespread popular support in its crusade against Marxist tyranny, despite the contradictory stories from war refugees throughout the country.

He accused Mr Chissano and Zimbabwe of orchestrating a series of civilian massacres since 1987 to discredit the rebels, deploying former Rhodesian Selous Scouts and employing tactics used by Portugal's dreaded Grupos Especiais. Ironically, former Rhodesian security agents, such as the late intelligence chief Ken Flower, have said that it was precisely those two groups which helped to form Renamo's initial units.

A US State Department report last year, which accused Renamo of killing 100,000 civilians and running virtual slave camps, was a fake, said Mr Dhlakama. And, while denying that South Africa backed his rebels, he saw no moral dilemma about support from a white minority government.