

# Mozambique talks bring govt, Renamo closer to peace

ROME. — Mozambique's government and Right-wing Renamo rebels held their first direct peace talks in Rome this week and pledged to try to end 15 years of bitter civil war that brought the African country close to collapse.

A joint statement issued yesterday after the July 8-10 talks at a religious charity centre made clear that the meeting had gone well and said another session would be held soon in Rome.

The talks came only a month after a previous attempt to hold a peace meeting in Malawi collapsed when Renamo leader Afonso Dhlakama refused to sit down with a team of senior ministers from Maputo's Left-wing government.

The two delegations at the Rome talks were headed by Mozambican Transport Minister Armando Emilio Guebuza and Raul Manuel Domingos, described as foreign affairs head of the Mozambique National Resistance (Renamo) rebels.

Archbishop Jaime Goncalves of Beira, an Italian government official and two representatives from the Sant'Egidio community where the talks were held acted as observers.

The statement said the two sides "were ready to commit themselves fully to the search for a working programme to end the

war in a spirit of mutual respect and understanding".

It added that the government and the rebels, who have fought a brutal war since independence from Portugal in 1975, had recognised each other as compatriots and "members of the great Mozambican family".

"Taking account of the superior interests of the Mozambican nation, the two sides agreed on the necessity to put aside their divisions and to concentrate on what unites them so as to create a common basis for dialogue in which to debate their different points of view in a spirit of mutual comprehension," the statement said.

Western diplomats in Lisbon said they expected the peace process to be held in Malawi or Kenya — favoured by the rebels — reflected the discreet behind-the-scenes role of the church in trying to get peace talks moving.

Pope John Paul visited Mozambique in 1988 and repeatedly pleaded for an end to the war, which has killed nearly 900 000 people and left a third of the 15 million population homeless. Western diplomats in Lisbon said they expected the peace process to be long and difficult. "It's not going to be easy negotiating with Renamo but everyone is pretty tired of the war," one diplomat said.

Diplomats also said Renamo had dispersed bands operating independently in the bush which might be difficult to control and discipline even if a peace agreement is reached centrally.

Mario Maracito, a director of the Sant'Egidio community, said: "When the next meeting will take place is secret but I can say that it will be very soon and in Italy."

Mr Maracito said the talks were held at Sant'Egidio because it had strong links with Mozambique and the confidence of both the government and the rebels.

The civil war has crippled Mozambique's farm-based economy and helped make the country one of the poorest in the world. Hundreds of thousands of refugees have fled to South Africa, Malawi and other countries to escape starvation and fighting. — Sapa-Reuter.