

'Cordial' talks mask battle for power in Mozambique

By Karl Maier

TWO BITTER adversaries in one of Africa's nastiest wars, the representatives of the Mozambican government and Renamo rebels, got on so well at their first peace talks in Rome this week that a joint statement said they had "recognised one another as compatriots and members of the great Mozambican family".

But the cordial atmosphere between the delegations' leaders, the Mozambican Transport Minister, Armando Guebuza, and Raul Domingos, deputy to the leader of the Mozambique National Resistance (Renamo), Afonso Dhlakama, masks a bitter struggle for power which an eventual peace agreement will surely unleash in the run-up to general elections scheduled for next year.

A key question is whether either side can make a peace agreement work. Some estimates already put the number of civilian dead in the 15-year-old war at 500,000. As President Joaquim Chissano said in an interview with *The Independent* in March: "We may come to good terms with Dhlakama, we may become brothers and we may live together, but both crying — because in the bush somewhere the massacres of the population will be continuing."

The next round of talks, expected in a fortnight, will centre on integrating the two warring armies, implementing a ceasefire, and the particularly thorny issue of whether to set up a multi-party political system, which Frelimo opposes and Renamo supports.

An accord would not only relieve the suffering of the 15 million population — a third of whom live in squalid resettlement camps and survive thanks to international food relief — but help the rest of southern Africa.

The war has cost Mozambique's neighbours, such as Zimbabwe and Malawi, millions of pounds in extra transport costs because rebel sabotage and years of neglect have left the country's three regional trade routes, through the ports of Maputo, Beira and Nacala, running at limited capacity.

Zimbabwe spends an estimated £250,000 a day on 7,000 troops stationed in Mozambique, and Malawi devotes an estimated 40 per cent of its foreign exchange earnings on re-routing cargo through South African ports.

The increasingly poor performance of Mr Chissano's badly equipped and fed 35,000-strong army against the rebels, the collapse of sympathetic governments in eastern Europe, and growing impatience among such Western allies as the United States and Britain for a peace deal, gave him little choice but to talk with Renamo, who had long been described as bandits supported by the white regime in South Africa.

The economy has continued to deteriorate, with an austerity programme backed by the International Monetary Fund, bringing small increases in production

while hitting the urban poor with rocketing prices. A series of strikes erupted in January and February over demands for better pay and working conditions.

Foreign relief officials warn of a major famine in the populous central province of Zambezia by September unless there is a huge increase in food aid. Rebel units are operating within 10 miles of the capital. The sabotage of the power lines from South Africa have repeatedly left Maputo in darkness in the first six months of the year.

Mr Dhlakama, too, has come under increasing pressure to break with tradition by putting forward a coherent political platform and agreeing to talk peace.

Western governments, outraged by Renamo's horrific human rights record and unconvinced about its vague anti-communist rhetoric, sought to clamp down on support from its principal backer, South Africa, and from far-right US, European and Arab groups.

Traditional chiefs who originally supported the rebels have found their civilian constituents tiring of Renamo's violence and constant demands for food.

By orchestrating Frelimo's abandonment of Marxism-Leninism as the official ideology at the party's fifth congress in July 1989, and by proposing a new constitution of universal suffrage, direct elections to parliament and the presidency, and individual freedoms, Mr Chissano undercut the rebels' political platform.