

Southern Africa News Features

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MOZAMBIQUE TALKS

The third round of talks aimed at bringing about a ceasefire in the 10-year-old bush war between Mozambique and the rebel Renamo movement have been abruptly cancelled by Renamo. Claiming that the Mozambique army was on an offensive, Renamo called off the talks scheduled to be held in Rome in mid September.

Despite the fact that no ceasefire has been declared by either side, and Renamo itself has been on the attack, both within Mozambique and along the border with Zimbabwe, no further explanation was given.

The first two rounds of talks made little or no progress. They were held in the Roman Catholic Santo Egidio community, where the cancelled talks were also scheduled to be held.

The government delegation was to have been led by Mozambique's Minister of Transport and Communications, Armando Guebuza, whilst the Renamo delegation in the past has been led by Raul Domingos, the head of external affairs. The Italian government and the Bishop of the Mozambique port city of Beira, Dom Jaime Goncalves, have been observers.

These delegations and observers last met in Italy from 11 to 14 August. At the end of that meeting they issued a joint communique which spoke of a deepened "spirit of mutual comprehension and respect" and a "fruitful and enlightening exchange of opinions".

Those bland diplomatic phrases did not disguise the enormous void which exists between the delegations. The word "obstacles" in the communique best sums up what occurred at the meeting as does the admission that it was necessary to "suspend" the meeting without touching on any fundamental issues.

Two years ago it would have been unthinkable that such a high powered government delegation including three Ministers, the leader a member of the ruling party Politbureau, would have even meet Renamo. Clandestine contacts had occurred but they were limited to that.

But today Mozambique faces harsh realities. Renamo, backed by South Africa and other external right wing forces, has devastated the economy and, according to UN statistics, been responsible for at least 750,000 war related deaths.

But, and despite these setbacks, the Mozambican government has politically out-manoeuvred Renamo at every stage in the debilitating war. It has an uncanny sense as to how to play the international political/diplomatic game.

Britain's Prime Minister, Mrs Margaret Thatcher, gives military support and training to Mozambique's army. The US State Department has denounced Renamo as "terrorists".

In stark contrast Renamo continues to commit blunders at every stage the most shocking of which, detailed by the UN and acknowledged by Britain and the US, is its human rights record.

Further, whilst the Mozambique government has taken the attempts to secure peace extremely seriously, Renamo and its external supporters are now clearly perceived as the principle obstacles to ending the turmoil.

Renamo's President, Afonso Dhlakama, arrived in Malawi for what should have been the first round of talks in June. Frelimo sent a 15 member high powered delegation. Confronted by such strength in depth Dhlakama "disappeared" the night before the talks were to begin.

Next he withdrew from the first Rome meeting sending Domingos in his place. Those talks achieved no more than a contact and agreement to meet again.

Renamo arrived at the next meeting two weeks late whilst the Mozambique delegation sat out the delay in Rome. The delay, Western diplomats believe, was deliberately contrived in the hope the government delegation would go home allowing Renamo to arrive after their departure and to argue that the Mozambican authorities had not been prepared to meet them.

But Mozambique's President, Joaquim Chissano, a consummate diplomat who was Foreign Minister for 13 years before coming his country's leader, foresaw this possibility and ordered the delegation to remain in Italy as long as was necessary.

When the talks finally began Renamo was not willing to discuss anything of substance. It objected to Mozambique's continued reference to them as "armed bandits".

In addition the Renamo delegation insisted that Kenya, which has a long history of opposition to Mozambique's ruling party and which has provided sanctuary to Renamo leaders for some 25 years, be brought in as a "mediator".

The government delegation objected. Kenya—and Zimbabwe—had acted as mediators to bring the two together. Now they were together and should negotiate as Mozambicans in the presence of Italy, as the host, and the church.

Domingos flew from Rome to Portugal where, he told Lisbon television in a bizarre interview, that he had been "invited by the Portuguese military intelligence services" which had long been their intermediary to the Portuguese government. It was highly embarrassing claim for the Portuguese government.

Apart from Renamo's tactical blunders the Mozambique government has been undermining such credibility as they may have had at another level.

A vigorous debate on a new constitution is underway in Mozambique. Reference to the ruling party should be removed from the constitution, the anthem and from the national flag is only one of many demands likely to be accepted. Renamo objects to these fundamental changes insisting it should be consulted.

The decision of the Mozambican government, announced on 31 July when the Rome talks should have begun, to hold multi-party elections next year, has caused a further dilemma for Renamo.

They claim they control 80 per cent of the country and to have the support of an even larger percentage of the people. But now, faced with the possibility of these claims being tested through the ballot box next year, Renamo argues that elections should not be held until at least 1992.

"Renamo's problem," said an African diplomat in Maputo, "is that at the tactical level they have been outflanked by the government. Now they are confronted by the likelihood of not only losing the battle but also the war".

Western diplomats agree but add another nuance to the argument. The Mozambique government is moving too fast for Renamo and its external backers recognise that the rebel movement cannot win an election in Mozambique whether it is next year or the following.

There is a need to buy time, to pursue the war while an option other than Renamo is put in place. Renamo, like Nicaragua's Contras, has been a pawn, one to be surrendered at the appropriate moment when other options are in place.

This is the gloomy prognosis as the Mozambique government and Renamo prepare to meet again. Renamo's options have narrowed more than the governments. If it is to have a place in a future Mozambique it has little time to secure it. (SARDC)