

Mozambican peace talks on the rocks as Renamo licks its wounds

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EFFORTS to end Mozambique's 15-year war stumbled badly this week when the Mozambique National Resistance (Renamo) announced it was boycotting the third round of peace talks in Rome because of what it described as a major government military drive against rebel strongholds. The authorities in Maputo, in turn, accused Renamo of using delaying tactics.

The rebel stayaway came at a critical juncture in President Joaquim Chissano's bid to end one of Africa's most brutal conflicts with a combination of direct peace talks, sponsored by the Vatican and the Italian government, and a wide-ranging political reform programme that is set to usher in a multi-party democracy and universal suffrage.

The round of talks tentatively scheduled for this week would have been the third, following the initial meeting in July and a second round last month.

"Politically, Chissano has boxed them around the ears, and militarily Frelimo has hurt the rebels this year," said one diplomatic source. "Renamo does not want the talks right now, they will avoid at all costs negotiating from a position of weakness."

Rebel spokesmen said Chissano had shown bad faith by launching an assault with Zimbabwean troops against the Renamo headquarters in the mountainous Gorongosa region of central Sofala province and a general offensive in three other provinces: Tete, Manica and Zambezia.

"It is the biggest offensive ever," Julius Sefo, Renamo's United States representative said this week in a telephone interview from his office. "We were supposed to be at the table, but President Afonso Dhlakama has said that we cannot go to the negotiations table to talk to the same person who is fighting us."

Officials of Chissano's Frelimo government denied the rebel charges. Foreign Minister Pascoal Mocumbi accused Renamo of employing "delaying tactics" which would "prolong the suffering of the Mozambican people".

Military analysts said there were no signs of an especially heavy military buildup by government forces. The estimated 5,000-strong Zimbabwean contingent, which protects the Beira Corridor and the Limpopo railroad in southern Mozambique, rotated brigades earlier this month. Since then, Zimbab-

Frelimo has hurt the rebels, said one observer, commenting on Renamo's decision to pull out of new peace talks. KARL MAIER reports from Maputo



President Joaquim Chissano

we's elite "2 Paratrooper" battalion has reportedly been following up on a successful offensive in May against rebel-controlled zones in the central provinces.

The apparent goal of Mozambique's 40-year-old Armed Forces Chief of Staff, Lieutenant-General Hama Thai, is to cut the rebels' principal supply route running from the southern tip of Malawi, across the Zambezi River to the mountain region of Gorongosa.

"Hama Thai seems to take this war very personally," said the analyst, "and he does not believe in sitting back and waiting for the outcome of the peace talks." The poorly-supplied Frelimo army has shown unusual spunk in recent months, particularly in the wealthy and populous Zambezia Province, where military operations have opened up nearly all major roads this year.

Earlier this month Frelimo forces launched an offensive to open the road linking the central town of Mocuba to the

rich tea-producing area of Milange, on the Malawi border.

The breakdown in the peace process comes just three weeks before the Mozambican legislature is scheduled to approve Chissano's proposals to end 15 years of one-party rule and establish a multi-party system with universal suffrage — key rebel demands.

Several long-time opposition figures, including Artur Vilankulu and Carlos Reis, have returned to Mozambique. Capital from South Africa, once Frelimo's sworn enemy because of its support for Renamo, is pouring in. Even the party's own hotel in central Maputo, The Rovuma, was taken over in June by the Protea Group of South Africa.

Many observers were surprised that Renamo has used complaints of a government offensive as justification for its new talks boycott, because both sides had agreed previously that a ceasefire would be the last agenda item to be discussed, once they had reached a political settlement.

While Renamo's spokesman in the US, Julius Sefo, agreed there was no ceasefire accord, he said that Renamo units had shown their good faith by taking defensive positions.

But that claim must be viewed sceptically as Mozambique's pro-government media have reported continued rebel attacks throughout the country.

Government officials, citing intelligence reports, said Dhlakama had dispatched heavily-armed units south to cut roads, railroads and power lines leading to Maputo. The officials are bracing for a concerted Renamo offensive on the capital.

The security situation around Maputo had shown signs of improvement in recent months: for instance the city has not had power cuts caused by sabotage since May, but southern Mozambique has been plagued by much rebel activity.

Any time Renamo comes under fire their response is to retaliate, and the government's most vulnerable point is the capital; any action around Maputo will have the most impact.

Renamo wants to take such action to keep from negotiating from a point of weakness, but militarily there is not much they can do to combat Chissano's political gains. Chissano's reforms have left Renamo with precious little to negotiate.