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Pretoria should answer rebel's plea

THE appalling suffering in Mozambique, where malnutrition and disease kill those wretched humans who survive the crossfire between government troops and the Mozambique National Resistance (MNR), seems endless. More than 600 000 people, including 380 000 children, have died in the 15-year bushwar so far. And the toll is growing by the hour.

Mr Afonso Dhlakama, the rebel leader, has now appealed for foreign intervention to help end the conflict. But he says that talks with the Frelimo government cannot resume until foreign troops, a Zimbabwean force guarding the Beira Corridor to protect Harare's economic jugular, leave his country. So a series of government-rebel peace meetings in Rome, offering the first glimmer of hope for that sorry country, have broken down.

Mr Dhlakama is keen that South Africa should become a key peacebroker. So it

should. With the Namibian-Angolan settlement ticking along nicely, it would be opportune for the talented interlocutors who achieved that success to switch their attentions to Mozambique. A prominent, impartial South African role in peace efforts there may also serve to finally dispel lingering suspicions — often denied — of Pretoria's backing of the MNR.

Behind the scenes, South Africa has been very much involved for some time in the peace efforts. But Mozambique's misery goes on, and it seems to be time for Pretoria to raise its profile in steering the enemies to reconciliation. Evicting Mozambique of 12 000 or more Zimbabwean soldiers, and possibly 5 000 Cuban troops, can be no more difficult than achieving the departure of about 45 000 foreign troops from Angola. Lending Mozambique the expertise of the Namibia-Angola experience would certainly do no harm.