

MOZAMBIQUE'S off-again on-again peace negotiations were definitely on this week as government and rebel negotiators resumed the third round of talks in Rome amid rising hopes for a major breakthrough to begin winding down the 15-year war.

The talks got off to a good start at the weekend with the announcement that the government and the Mozambique National Resistance (Renamo) representatives had agreed to effectively convert the observers at the first two rounds into full-fledged negotiators.

Mozambique's stuttering talks finally get off to a start

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The mediation team is led by an Italian government official, Mario Raffaelli, and includes two representatives of the Santo Egidio Catholic charity, Andrea Riccardi and Matteo Zuppi, and Jaime Goncalves, the Catholic Archbishop of Beira, Mozambique's second city.

The arrival of Renamo's leader, Afonso Dhlakama, in Rome also suggested that the rebel delegation, head-

After numerous stumbling attempts at restoring peace in the war-torn country of Mozambique, talks in Rome between the Frelimo government and Renamo rebels have resumed.

By **KARL MAIER** in Maputo

ed by External Affairs Secretary Raul Domingos, would be prepared to take decisions on the major points separating the two sides: the timing of general elections, a plan to inte-

grate the two warring armies, and a ceasefire.

Most of Renamo's previous demands for a multi-party system, a free market economy and basic indi-

vidual freedoms were met in the new constitution approved on November 2 by the Frelimo-controlled legislature, once known as the People's Assembly but renamed as the Assembly of the Republic.

The constitution, proposed by Chissano in January, even dropped the word "people's" from the country's name and laid down the legal framework for a strict separation of

powers — the executive, legislature and judiciary.

Laws being drafted to regulate the registration of political parties and elections, tentatively set for next year, are to be ready in early December, just after the new constitution enters into force.

Diplomatic sources said the government had already set up ad hoc committees in Maputo to prepare detailed

plans to combine the Frelimo and Renamo armies and to draft a ceasefire proposal.

International and Mozambican relief workers are hoping that the two sides can agree to halt fighting along the main highway which runs through Zambezia province from the town of Milange on the Malawi border to Quelimane, the provincial capital. Unless they do, United Nations officials warn that Mozambique could face the biggest famine disaster in its 15 years

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of independence, with nearly one million people at risk of starvation.

At least 400 000 of those civilians have been brought under government control since February during offensives by a combination of the Frelimo army and a rapidly growing traditional militia led by a 28-year-old traditional header named Manuel Antonio.

"I fear that a disaster is imminent now in Mozambique," said Peter Simkin, the UN Emergency Coordinator in Maputo. "We could see starvation on a scale this country has never seen".

Most international airlifts into Zambezia have been suspended, due principally to the rising fuel prices sparked by the Gulf crisis.

It now costs 10 times more to deliver a ton of maize than to purchase it. Although government forces have succeeded in opening most roads in the province, hundreds of thousands of war victims can still be reached only by air.

The only relief agency which has worked on both sides of the conflict, the International Committee of the Red Cross, has presented a plan to the Mozambique government to create zones of peace in areas worst hit by severe hunger.

Top Red Cross representatives are believed to have discussed the issue last week with Dhlakama, who arrived in Geneva from Nairobi after meetings there with Kenyan and United States officials.

Once an agreement is reached, the big challenge facing Dhlakama is to transform Renamo from a military force into a political party in time for Mozambique's first free elections since independence from Portugal in 1975.

Already, a Renamo splinter group, the Mozambican National Union (Unamo), and the Liberal and Democratic Party of Mozambique (Palmo) have begun organising political support.