

Mozambique's radical changes slowed by war and inertia

Paul Fauvet in Maputo finds that neither a general ceasefire with the rebels nor constitutional reform is yet being realised

THE Frelimo government of Mozambique is trying to normalise life in the war-torn country by introducing a pluralist constitution while simultaneously implementing a ceasefire with MNR rebels backed by South Africa.

By the end of this week, Zimbabwean troops who have been backing the government against the MNR must start moving into the two narrow rail corridors that connect their land-locked country with the Indian Ocean ports of Maputo and Beira.

Under the terms of the agreement signed on December 1 between the government and the MNR, the Zimbabwean forces will be confined to the corridors, which the rebels have pledged not to attack.

The agreement represents a compromise between the rebels, who have conceded that Zimbabwe has a legitimate interest in Mozambique — the route to Beira is Zimbabwe's cheapest and shortest outlet to the sea — and the government, which will no longer use Zimbabwean troops in the front line against the rebels.

By January 5, all Zimbabwean forces, currently estimated at more than 10,000,

should be in the corridors. This raises the question of whether Mozambique's conscript army can possibly defend the positions which the Zimbabweans evacuate, including former MNR strongholds captured in joint Mozambican and Zimbabwean operations during the past year in the central provinces of Manica and Sofala.

The Zimbabweans recall an embarrassing episode in 1985 when their paratroopers captured the MNR headquarters in Gorongosa district — known as "Casa Banana" — and turned it over to Mozambican troops. The Mozambicans, inadequately supplied, were driven out six months later, forcing the Zimbabweans to mount a second operation to retake the headquarters.

Unless the army's shoddy logistics section is shaken up, there is a real likelihood that the string of small towns south of the Zambezi River captured earlier this year may fall once more into rebel hands.

The December 1 agreement at best means a ceasefire in two narrow strips of territory. Elsewhere the war continues as usual. The MNR has maintained its pressure on Maputo, and last Friday once again blew

up the power line from South Africa that supplies electricity to the capital.

The Mozambican army commander, Lieutenant-General Tobias Dai, called on his troops just two days after the agreement to "redouble" their efforts against the MNR until a general ceasefire could be reached.

The war goes on against a background of sweeping constitutional changes. Mozambique is officially now a multi-party state, and the country's first pluralist elections are due for next year. This has alarmed the

The government's MNR opponents openly oppose a multi-party system

MNR, whose spokesmen have been explicit in favouring a two-party system, with just themselves challenging the ruling Frelimo, rather than an uncontrollable multitude of political forces.

The multi-party decision has undercut the MNR, which no longer has a credible reason for waging war. Raul Domingos, the MNR's chief negotiator with the government, has denounced new political parties, even before they are formed, as "creations of Frelimo".

But the government is deter-

mined to press ahead with a law on the registration of parties later this month, and with a new electoral law early in the new year. This will define voter registration procedures, the size of constituencies, rules on funding political campaigns, and the other nuts and bolts of election organisation.

Several incipient rightwing parties are already preparing to challenge Frelimo at the ballot box. They are likely to provide a political home for those who dislike Frelimo's socialist policies, but who are repelled by the violence of the MNR.

The new constitution, which came into effect at the end of November, also abolishes the death penalty, guarantees freedom of the press, recognises the right to strike and allows free movement round the country.

The radical implications of much of this have still to be fully grasped, and much of the state machinery carries on unchanged. Policemen and soldiers on roadblocks are still demanding travel permits and many official bodies still expect the media to repeat obediently what they say. Police in the central city of Beira have beaten up local reporters twice in the past month.

President Joaquim Chissano, the main mover behind constitutional change, has consistently warned that the rights and freedoms it enshrines must be fought for if they are to become a reality.