

THE WORLD IN FOCUS

By KARL MAIER: Maputo

THE unthinkable happened on Christmas Eve when three Renamo members stepped off a Mozambican Air Lines flight from Paris and walked into the VIP lounge at Maputo airport.

Ironically, as they crossed the threshold, just steps behind Mozambican Transport Minister Armando Guebuza, the lights went out as the airport experienced a short blackout, thanks to rebel sabotage which has left Maputo's power system in a precarious state.

The three Renamo officials — General Pascoal Jose, Brigadier Jeronimo Malaguetta, and Major Inacio Morgado — are part of the 10-nation Joint Verification Commission, set up to monitor the first-ever agreement between President Joaquim Chissano's Frelimo government and Renamo.

The deal, signed on December 1 in Rome, calls for the confinement of Zimbabwean troops to within 3km of the Limpopo and Beira transport corridors in return for a pledge by the rebels to end their sabotage of the routes, the

Mozambique takes first step to peace

region's shortest, and potentially its cheapest, outlets to the sea.

Because the commission is small with just 46 members, the agreement will be a major test of trust between the warring parties — a scarce commodity in the 15 years of conflict since Mozambique's independence. Yet if it works Mozambique will have taken a major step on the road to peace.

The fourth round of talks in Rome between Frelimo, led by Guebuza, and Renamo, headed by External Affairs Secretary Raul Domingos, were suspended during the holiday period and are scheduled to resume this month. The negotiations, which began in July, have entered their most delicate phase, with the timing of general elections and the integration of government and rebel armies on the bargaining table.

The first full meeting of the commission took place on December 27 at the

Military Club in Maputo. Despite an announcement by the Italians, who are chairing the body, that the corridor limits had been defined in Rome, the gathering quickly found that they had not. That resulted in the establishment of a subcommission, made up of only military personnel, to negotiate the details.

The main issue was how to establish the corridors' boundaries, particularly around towns that bulge beyond the 3km limit. In general, Renamo agreed that such areas, like at the airport at Chimoiio on the Beira Corridor and the Zimbabwean base at Mapai on the Limpopo River, should be part of the peace zone. The rebels also agreed to provide written notification to the commission each time one of their units crosses either corridor. Zimbabwe made a similar commitment on its troop movements. The subcommission also agreed that the towns of Maputo, Beira

and Matola, an industrial suburb of the capital, are part of the corridors and thus cannot be attacked.

Again confusion reigned over what date the partial ceasefire was to come into effect. The Mozambicans and Zimbabweans angrily charged that Renamo violated the agreement by attacking targets on the Beira railway line on January 2. But it appears that the agreement was only set to take effect on January 5, the day that the Zimbabwean troops were to be within their 3km limit.

The verification commission includes representatives from Britain, the United States, France, the Soviet Union, Kenya, Zambia, Congo, Portugal and Zimbabwe. This week members began visiting sites along both corridors.

The arrival of the rebel officials followed approval in mid-December of a new law legalising opposition parties by the nation's parliament. The legisla-

tion is a key part of Chissano's drive to entice Renamo in from the bush to the campaign platform. Chissano's strategy is to transform the war from a military conflict into an electoral battle.

The war, which has spread throughout Mozambique, has taken 900 000 lives, according to United Nations estimates, and forced several million peasants from their homes. The government and the UN have asked international donors for emergency food aid for 1.9-million displaced civilians of the 14-million population.

In what could prove to be a major breakthrough, the International Red Cross gained the commitment of both the Frelimo army and Renamo in early December to stop forcing peasants off their land and to allow Red Cross teams to operate freely in the war zones.

Mozambicans, and indeed people throughout southern Africa, are warily watching to see if the partial ceasefire will hold. If it does it may well prove to be the first concrete step towards peace in this war-ravaged country.