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# Painstaking search for peace

IT was a sunny afternoon at Mbuyanguana, on the outskirts of Maputo, when Renamo rebels burst into a wedding party firing AK47 assault rifles. Four people were murdered, four were injured including the groom and 25 children were kidnapped and taken into the bush.

This recent attack, as senseless and cruel as any other in Mozambique's 15-year-old civil war, demonstrated once again the failure of the Mozambican army to defend innocent civilians even within the vicinity of the capital.

However, for the first time since independence in 1975 there are real possibilities for an end to the conflict which has made 80 per cent of the country insecure, destroyed billions of dollars of infrastructure and forced more than a million people to flee their country's borders.

In the past two years, President Joaquim Chissano has searched painstakingly for a political solution which would bring an end to the civil war and give his impoverished country hopes for economic revival.

Since 1988 his achievements have been remarkable. He abandoned the rhetoric of the past which branded all rebels as traitors and bandits and shed the naive belief that a military solution was possible. He launched a successful international diplomatic effort to isolate Renamo, backed first by white Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and until last year by South Africa. He has opened peace talks with the rebels, holding four rounds of negotiations within the last seven months.

He has steered the country further away from its traditional Communist bloc alliance and edged his once rigidly Marxist-Leninist Frelimo party away from socialism and a monopoly of state power towards a liberal multiparty system in spite of hardline opposition.

The crowning achievement of this process of political transition was the new constitution which came into effect last month. It committed the country to a mixed economy, freedom of the press, an independent judiciary and multiparty



President Chissano's first meeting with Nelson Mandela, the vice-president of the African National Congress, in Zambia.

elections. It also marked the culmination of a radical policy review begun by the late President Samora Machel in the 1980s who started the process of reform as the economic failures became apparent.

By meeting all the main political demands of Renamo, Mr Chissano's rapid offensive has called the rebels bluff and caught them off-guard. He has challenged them to surrender their weapons, form a political organisation and contest power and their popularity through the ballot box. With no test of public opinion it is unclear how much support either side has in the countryside.

Signs of Renamo's trepidation in giving up the armed struggle and their increasingly weakened political position have been amply demonstrated recently as the rebels have been reduced to criticising the methods of Mr Chissano's reform rather than the substance.

Some political observers fear that Mr Chissano has gone too far too quickly leaving the rebels little room to manoeuvre and even less chance of being able to come out of the conflict with any credibility.

A partial ceasefire was negotiated last month under which the 7,000 Zimbabwean troops stationed in Mozambique to support the government are being confined to the transport corridors linking Zimbabwe to Maputo and Beira. An international monitoring commission, including Renamo representatives, has been set up to oversee the agreement.

More talks were scheduled this month between the government and the rebels and observers believe the government is determined to get a

full ceasefire agreement by April. But obstacles remain.

For Renamo to give up their arms, they must have at least the glimmer of winning power. For the moment, all cards seem to be in Frelimo's hands, particularly given its extensive political organisation throughout the country.

Renamo appears nervous of calling for a cessation of the conflict because of the very real possibility that such a move would be ignored and expose the rebel's lack of control over the bulk of their fighters and the degree to which many of them have abandoned a disciplined political struggle for armed banditry against the civilian population.

Even if Renamo and the government can agree on a compromise acceptable to both sides insecurity will continue to plague the countryside for many years. Integration of the rebel forces into the army will prove difficult.

Furthermore, whether multiparty elections can produce a stable political order remains highly questionable. Before Mr Chissano's conversion to pluralist democracy he, and many senior Frelimo figures, were concerned about the possible eruption of tribalism.

A negative strain of black Mozambican nationalism has emerged in parliamentary debates on the issue of nationality. At least one of the embryonic political parties, the liberal and democratic party (palmo) has launched a political critique of the government on the grounds it has given preferential treatment to indians, whites and people of mixed race.

At a recent press conference

Mr Chissano acknowledged that the decision to opt for a multiparty democracy was not without dangers. He confirmed that the decision had been taken against widespread opposition among ordinary people in the rural areas. But argued that the "the choice of a multiparty democracy results from the need to provide a new dynamic to the political process."

His vision in that respect will bode well in the international aid community, which is increasingly pressing the issue of democratisation in Africa, where, in contrast to other leaders on the continent, he is seen as a willing, rather than a reluctant, reformer.

It is still very early to judge the prospects for political transition in Mozambique. But it is clear that the fundamental revision of thinking in the last two years has given the country a chance, in spite of large difficulties, of climbing out of the quagmire into which it has slid.