

MNR bandits ^{H 7/2 191} not ready for peace, say talks officials

THE spurious grounds used by the MNR bandits in Rome to wreck the latest attempt to end Mozambique's 15-year war has emphasised fears that the rebel movement is not ready for peace.

The latest Rome talks were supposed to deal with political issues. But the meeting never got that far. Instead, according to a senior Mozambican official, it was deadlocked by the MNR on three grounds.

The first was the MNR's refusal to accept the findings of the eight-

nation verification commission set up last November to monitor breaches of the ceasefire agreed along the corridors to Beira and Maputo. Fourteen ceasefire breaches were reported to the commission. Eight were investigated and in six cases the commission found that the MNR was "probably" guilty.

The MNR bandit delegation in Rome categorically rejected these findings, charging that the commission — including Kenya which has close relations with the rebels,

Britain, the United States and France — was partial.

The MNR also went back on the November peace agreement, arguing that cities and towns in the corridors such as Maputo, Beira, Chimoio and Chokwe were excluded, giving them the right to attack them.

Bizarre

The third MNR reason for breaking the Rome talks was the most bizarre. Under the November agreement Zimbabwe forces in Mozambique

have been confined to the two peace corridors. Since then, the MNR has charged, Zimbabwean troops have been integrated into the Mozambican armed forces and are being taught Mozambique's national language, Portuguese.

All the evidence suggests, however, that Zimbabwe has adhered strictly to the November agreement. Its forces withdrew from the Gorongosa area, once the MNR symbolic headquarters, late last year and the area has been subjected

to an MNR offensive since then.

On December 20, Zimbabwe withdrew its armoured battalion from the strategic Tete Corridor linking Zimbabwe and Malawi, through which 60 percent of Malawi's trade flowed.

During the November negotiations, Mozambique had proposed that the Tete corridor be included in the agreement. The MNR refused, arguing that corridor served Malawi's and not Zimbabwe's interests. Some two weeks after the Zimba-

bwean battalion withdrew the MNR bandits began attacking the route. A number of trucks were destroyed and drivers killed. Now most truckers are taking the longer route through Zambia at double the freight cost.

Members of the verification commission are disappointed, but not surprised, by the Rome deadlock. "To use a British adage," one European member said, "you can take a horse to water but you cannot make it drink."

"We have got the MNR to Rome. But they are not ready to drink from the fountain of peace."

Why they will not and how to persuade them to do so are the issues confronting the mediators as they try to get the negotiations back on track. The reason for the MNR's delaying tactics is simple enough. They want to be guaranteed a share of power once the war ends.

For years the MNR bandits had insisted on multi-party elections. Late last year the sole and

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ruling party, Frelimo, which had fought the liberation war against Portugal, adopted political plurality.

Elections

The Mozambican government had originally hoped to hold elections this year but the MNR's stalling in Rome has made this possibility increasingly unlikely.

Frelimo's decision to accept plurality posed a major dilemma for the MNR. Founded by Rhodesian intelligence to counter Zimbabwean nationalist guerrillas and inherited by South Africa in 1980, the MNR has waged one of the most bestial wars in modern times.

War-related deaths attributable to the MNR bandits are estimated at over one million. Mutilated people with ears, noses and lips cut off are common in some rural areas. Almost every family among Mozambique's 15 million population has lost a relative. The MNR are feared by the population.

In Rome in November, they did a remarkable volte-face. They now oppose multi-party elections and the new constitution which has legalised them.

They said privately that they had not been in the bush for 15 years fighting and suffering to achieve nothing. They wanted a coalition with Frelimo, not a multi-party election in which, most observers believe, they would obtain under 10 percent of the vote if polling was free from intimidation and peace prevailed.

A further problem the MNR faces is just how much of Mozambique it controls and how many of those the government describes as "armed bandits" come under any central control and would respond to a ceasefire agreement.

Over the past two years MNR control over rural towns and the countryside has diminished. While external support for them has not totally ended, the indications are that even some of their most right-wing backers have become embarrassed by their atrocities.

Liberalisation

This has coincided with Mozambique's adoption of a policy of trade liberalisation and the programme of political reform. This has paid dividends with the United States recently announcing its aid to Mozambique this year will be approximately US\$110 million, its biggest programme in sub-Saharan Africa. In addition the US is granting a further US\$5 to US\$10 million to help offset increased fuel prices.

Washington's irritation over MNR breaches of the ceasefire in the peace corridors and delaying tactics in Rome has been clearly enunciated on several regional stops by the US assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Mr Herman Cohen.

Meanwhile, the Mozambican government is pursuing its own agenda, with or without the MNR. A few fledgling parties have begun to open offices in Maputo. Their

policies are confused (overtly racist in one case) and who, if anyone, is behind them is uncertain.

Peace remains Frelimo's priority. President Joaquim Chissano said in November he hoped that the creation of the two corridors of peace would have a ripple effect leading to the creation of zones of peace proposed by the Red Cross.

But the MNR bandit leader, Afonso Dhlakama, rejected the proposal. The prospects of peace and of rebuilding the shattered nation remains as elusive as ever. — Sardo.