

Mozambique: Setback to peace

The *Resistência Nacional Moçambicana* (RENAMO or MNR) rebel movement, always an elusive foe of the beleaguered government army on the battlefield, is proving to be just as slippery at the negotiating table (AC Vol 31 No 21). The fifth meeting between government and rebel negotiators, which ended on 30 January in Rome, marked a step backwards in the effort to settle the 16-year war.

What had been billed as the first serious discussion about the country's future political system decayed into bickering and confusion. At issue was the report of the Joint Verification Commission (JVC), which blamed RENAMO for at least six violations of a 1 December mini-ceasefire on the Limpopo and Beira Corridors, the two transport routes linking Zimbabwe to the Indian Ocean. RENAMO's chief negotiator, foreign affairs chief **Raul Domingos**, denied responsibility for the raids. This was despite evidence compiled by the the Commission, on which representatives of RENAMO, the government and nine other countries (including **Britain, Italy, Kenya and Portugal**) sit.

The dispute was especially frustrating for JVC members since there has been good news on the ground. The December ceasefire, despite the initial violations, had been holding since 9 January. RENAMO has dumbfounded some of its most ardent critics, who had scoffed at the rebels' ability to control their fighters. In certain areas along the Beira Corridor, the government has even disarmed the rag-tag militias, held responsible for some of the highway robberies.

There was a further skirmish involving the JVC when an 8 February report by the Portuguese news agency, *Lusa*, accused the UK representative, Ambassador **Maeve Fort**, of being 'inexplicably aggressive' towards RENAMO, with Britain 'playing the game of Zimbabwe'. In consequence, the JVC was close to collapse, said the agency. This produced strong denials from Fort and from the JVC head, Italy's ambassador to Maputo, **Manfredo di Camerana**.

The impasse at the negotiating table is much to the liking of RENAMO leader **Afonso Dhlakama**, who appears unable to cope with the speed of President **Joaquim Chissano's** reform programme. And he feels safe in the knowledge that unless he agrees to stop the war, Chissano's drive to establish a multi-party democracy fuelled by investment will run into the wall of widespread rural violence. The new constitution entered into force at midnight on 30 November, the law governing political parties took effect on 7 February and another bill on press freedom is ready to go before parliament. The rapid changes sponsored by the ruling *Frente para a Libertação de Moçambique* (FRELIMO) has taken the bite out of RENAMO's political programme. After the latest breakdown in talks, the United States Assistant Secretary of State of African Affairs, **Herman Cohen**, voiced the widely held view that Renamo was having trouble transforming itself from a guerrilla army into a political movement (AC Vol 32 No 3).

So difficult is his position becoming, that Dhlakama has been pushing - so far in vain - for a one-to-one meeting with Chissano. The idea is said to have the backing of **Roland**

'**Tiny**' **Rowland**, chief executive of the British-based multinational Lonrho, a major player in the Mozambique peace process, with considerable holdings in Mozambique and Zambia. Dhlakama's request for a meeting with Chissano came in early January, when Zambian President **Kenneth Kaunda** visited Mozambique and delivered the message.

Kaunda had met Dhlakama and Domingos on 18 December to ask that the rebels stop attacking the highway linking the town of Chipata, near the Malawian border, with Lusaka. Just two weeks later, that road became vital to Malawi's economy after rebel units closed its main foreign trade route, the 358-kilometre corridor running through Tete province to Zimbabwe and South Africa. That left the Zambian road as the main alternative. Malawi's natural outlet to the sea, the Nacala Corridor through northern Mozambique, is still in dire need of repair before it can handle a substantial load.

Despite the rebels' previously warm relations with Malawi, Lilongwe refused a request to host a radio relay station for RENAMO officials in Rome to communicate with colleagues in the field. RENAMO cited communications problems in Rome as a reason for being unable to proceed with discussions on political matters. The three-man RENAMO team stationed in Maputo as part of the JVC made similar complaints about a lack of communication with Dhlakama.

With the onset of the rainy season, RENAMO is seeking to retake the wide areas lost to government forces during 1990, especially in the fertile province of Zambézia. But, from RENAMO's point of view, the Zambézia military position has taken a sharp turn for the worse. The pro-government Naprama militia, led by the prophet **Manuel Antonio**, has overrun the rebel strongholds on the Zambézia plateau around the towns of Murrua, Mugulama and Mulevala. The region was controlled by some of RENAMO's best troops and led by the famed rebel general **Calisto Meque**, whom the government army had claimed was killed in the July 1988 battle for Gile. Diplomatic sources say the 31 year-old Meque, who like many of RENAMO's commanders was a Shona-speaker born in Manica province, was executed by Naprama forces last year near Mulevala.

The RENAMO offensive is focussing on the provinces of Manica and Sofala. As the Zimbabweans began withdrawing to the corridors in mid-December, rebel units began filling the vacuum. The International Committee of the Red Cross has resumed work in RENAMO-controlled zones again following a December accord with the government and RENAMO which committed both sides to stop forced relocations of civilians and to allow aid workers to operate on both sides of the conflict. The international observers on the JVC say that the 7,000-strong Zimbabwean contingent in Mozambique has withdrawn to the corridors, a view disputed by the rebels, who presented a document alleging that Zimbabwean forces dressed in Frelimo uniforms were still stationed at 50 points in seven provinces. Few observers take the claim seriously. One team that visited Boane, about 30 miles West of Maputo, found no evidence of a Zimbabwean presence. The JVC investigation continues ●