

Exhausted by 16 years of war, Mozambicans plead for peace

Argus 16/5/1991

IAN MacKENZIE of Reuter reports from Chimoio, Mozambique

FOR the first time in its history Mozambique is a multiparty state, but the problems of introducing democracy to a country devastated by 16 years of civil war are almost overwhelming.

Relief workers and political sources say many people in rural areas have heard little of the dramatic political changes in the capital, Maputo, which are aimed at turning the country into a parliamentary democracy.



Most couldn't care less. What they want is an end to the civil war between the ruling Mozambique Liberation Front (Frelimo) and Mozambican National Resistance (Renamo) rebels, whose current peace talks are stalled in Rome.

"No-one cares who is at the top, or going up, or going down. They are exhausted. All they want is peace, a settled life and the basic necessities," said a Mozambican relief worker in central Manica province, where drought has added to the hardships of war.

Mozambique's first legal opposition party, the Social and Democratic Party of Mozambique (Palmo), held its founding congress in the port of Beira last week.

But this milestone along the road to democracy went unnoticed in much of a country where television is confined to the capital, and few radios and no newspapers are available outside urban areas.

While the congress was in session, Rafael Adriano, a 28-year-old nurse helping refugees near the provincial town of Chimoio, said he had never heard of Palmo.

Nor did he know anything of the political changes undertaken by Frelimo to change Mozambique from a Marxist-oriented single party state to a parliamentary democracy with a market economy.

"I am not informed about all those changes. I haven't even heard rumours," he said.

A top Frelimo source admitted the problems of bringing democracy to a country nearly the size of France and Germany combined but almost totally lacking in infrastructure.

President Joaquim Chissano has promised presidential and parliamentary elections next year. "This will be a major undertaking," said a Western diplomat in neighbouring Zimbabwe.

"How do you define constituencies? How do you get a census of electors? How do you supervise voting? Where is the money coming from?" the diplomat asked.

"It will be difficult enough with a ceasefire. Without a ceasefire, it will be almost impossible to have elections.

"What you want out of an election is some legitimacy for the government, what you will have is an election confined to urban areas," he added.

Relief estimates vary, but about 1.5 million Mozambicans are refugees in neighbouring states, most of them in impoverished Malawi.

Up to six million more people are internal refugees after being displaced from their homes by a war that has raged virtually since independence from Portugal in 1975.

The International Commission of the Red Cross estimates that up to three million people are at risk this year from famine due to war and drought.

Field reports indicate an intensification of the struggle between Frelimo and Renamo for control of the people.

Zimbabwean troops, in Mozambique at the government's request, withdrew to the Beira and Limpopo transport corridors linking landlocked Zimbabwe to the Indian Ocean under a December partial ceasefire.

Since then, Renamo — backed by right-wing groups in South Africa, Europe and the United States — has increased small-scale operations, particularly in areas vacated by the Zimbabweans.