

Mozambique

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by Paul Moorcraft

Taking tea with Renamo

IT'S not every day you get a phone call to fly into probably the world's biggest current war to take tea with a man said to be the worst mass-killer since Adolf Hitler and Pol Pot. I travelled to central Mozambique recently to talk to Afonso Dhlakama, the warlord who runs Renamo. He is said to be responsible for the deaths of over 200 000 people, the mass mutilation of civilians by cutting off their ears, noses and lips, the destruction of a whole country, and the cause of millions of refugees in southern Africa.

Since 1977, Renamo has been at war with the Frelimo government. Renamo was born in double original sin. It was formed by the white Rhodesians and then nourished by South Africa. Renamo, however, says it would sup with the devil to get arms to fight the Marxists. And there is little doubt that Renamo has capitalised upon a massive peasant revolt against the excesses of Marxist rule in Mozambique. Its former ties with white racists and the record of alleged atrocities have ensured that Renamo has the world's worst PR image, except perhaps for Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge.

I had spent some time with Dhlakama in 1986. After marching for weeks through the bush I reached him in his rebel HQ in the forests of central Mozambique. He was at first suspicious. After all, he had a large price on his head as the most wanted man in southern Africa. Over 100 000 troops — government soldiers allied with the Zimbabwean and Tanzanian armies as well as Cubans, Russians and East Germans — were chasing him.

Several weeks ago in Mozambique it was different. I had a VIP welcome. I reached the rebel HQ by riding cross-country on large new motorbikes. Afonso Dhlakama greeted me like a long-lost brother as he said: "Welcome to Free Mozambique. We have won the war."

The 38-year-old Catholic-trained leader looks like a timid bank clerk, not a warlord or



Renamo's leader Afonso Dhlakama.

mass murderer, but I suppose even Hitler had his good days. For the next three days we talked about peace and the agenda for the Second National Congress of his party which was being held during December. (The last congress was in 1989.) He also talked about his de-

sire to restore the freedom of religion and his hatred of Frelimo's policy of collective villages.

A confident Dhlakama told me: "We've won the war because we have forced the Frelimo government to negotiate with us. This is because we have won the war on the ground. We control 85 percent of the country and half the 14 million population. The government is just hiding in the cities." He has also taken the war to Zimbabwe, where Renamo has established permanent bases. "Without the Zimbabwe National Army, Frelimo would collapse overnight," Dhlakama said.

I asked him in detail about atrocities. "It's all Frelimo government propaganda. That's all Marxists are good at: propaganda. We have fought for 15 years, how could we have survived for so long without popular support?"

Dhlakama now wants a ceasefire, the removal of foreign troops and internationally supervised free and fair elections to introduce a multi-party system. The Italian government, with Portugal, Britain and America in the background, is trying to broker an agreement which will herald the country's first ever free election in 1993.

"And we will win 85 percent of the vote," said the garrulous warlord. Mozambicans will vote for peace, not necessarily Dhlakama. Only Renamo can stop the war. Mozambique is destroyed. The country has gone back to the Middle Ages. Sometimes the peasants are naked or they wear tree bark. It is the poorest country in the world. Maybe the cause is Marxism or maybe it is the havoc caused by the Renamo rebels. Both sides have much to answer for in this hidden war.

It is not a TV war, like the Gulf conflict or Vietnam. On the one side Frelimo, which now says it has renounced Marxism, discourages journalists from filming very much except peasants who have been mutilated. And access

to Renamo-controlled territory is often difficult and dangerous. So Mozambicans die like flies, yet few outsiders care, partly because they don't see it on TV.

Dhlakama has a touching faith in British power. "It is the key to peace," he argued. The portly guerrilla chieftain asked why a British Conservative government was spending so much money training a Marxist Frelimo army in Zimbabwe while it couldn't afford to maintain some of its own famous regiments. It is a good question. Dhlakama says that Britain is prolonging the war. He wants Britain to step up its pressure on Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe to pull out his army from Mozambique. He also wants British military aid to Frelimo to stop. "Because of the Lonrho company's investment in my country, Britain should want peace. Along with the Americans, Britain could bring peace tomorrow."

But the key country is really South Africa. P.W. Botha backed Renamo, but Dhlakama was very bitter about Pretoria's cut-back in military supplies in 1984. Dhlakama has attacked South Africa's rapprochement with Maputo and once described Frelimo as a "South African-backed Soviet surrogate state". But in June 1991 Dhlakama secretly met F.W. de Klerk in Nairobi. Relations with Pretoria have warmed and Dhlakama told me that if he wins the 1993 elections he would establish "good diplomatic relations" with South Africa.

As I left the rebel HQ for the long journey home, I thanked a military commander who had helped me. I gave him a Swiss army knife as a present. A cynical whisper came from my journalist companion: "Now he can cut off ears, noses and lips with Swiss precision." I hope my colleague is wrong.

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