

PRESIDENT Robert Mugabe appeared uncomfortable and somewhat nervous when he returned to Harare after an overnight trip to Malawi earlier this month. Pursing his lips and folding his arms tightly across his chest, the Zimbabwe leader told journalists at the airport the startling news: he met Renamo leader Afonso Dhlakama while in Malawi.

Mugabe, staunchest of the frontline leaders, even found some moderate words to say about Dhlakama.

"He is the leader of Renamo and my first reading of him is that he is a man with some ideas and a person who, naturally, is anxious that the position of Renamo be assured after the peace process," said Mugabe. "He is talking peace and expresses his desire for peace."

Mugabe said future talks with the Renamo leader were possible but he adamantly insisted there was no discussion of Dhlakama's demand that Zimbabwe withdraw its 7 000 troops deployed in central Mozambique. Mugabe did, however, indicate that once the peace process gets underway and there is a general ceasefire throughout Mozambique, the Zimbabwean troops will be withdrawn promptly.

The Malawi meeting was a dramatic turnaround that may herald a breakthrough in Mozambique's stalled peace negotiations. Or the meeting could backfire and cause Renamo to continue delaying any agreement.

It is evident to all that a settlement is badly needed to end Mozambique's 16-year conflict that has taken more than one million lives, caused another million to flee Mozambique and has displaced an estimated six million Mozambicans who are refugees in their own country.

The unending war also troubles all the countries of southern Africa, particularly Zimbabwe which is spending an estimated US\$300-million a year to safeguard the Beira corridor, the landlocked country's route to the sea.

It is understandable that Mugabe, hard-pressed to reduce his budget deficit, would want to speed up the Mozambican peace process. He found it distasteful to contemplate meeting Dhlakama, a man Mugabe had frequently condemned as a South African puppet who had butchered thousands of innocent civilians. Yet others encouraged Mugabe to meet Dhlakama. The beleaguered Mozambican President Joaquim Chissano is desperate to achieve a peace settlement and when he met Mugabe in December he apparently encouraged the Zimbabwean leader to talk with Dhlakama to try to breathe new life into the ineffective Rome negotiations.

The Mugabe/Dhlakama meeting was arranged by Tiny Rowland, whose multinational Lonrho has extensive holdings in Mozambique. Rowland has the reputation for influencing African politics to suit Lonrho's

Uneasy Mugabe sups with the devil

*Robert Mugabe's surprise
meeting with Renamo rebel
leader, Afonso Dhlakama,
could pave the way for
peace ... or backfire if the
guerrilla leader does not
get what he wants.*

By ANDREW MELDRUM

interests, and a peaceful Mozambique would greatly boost the profitability of Lonrho's Mozambican cotton estates, citrus ranches, gold mines and hotels.

Mugabe left for Malawi intending to keep his groundbreaking talks with Dhlakama a secret, but leaks to the press forced him to announce the meeting upon his return to Harare.

For Dhlakama, the meeting with Mugabe represents a major step towards respectability and acceptance as an African political leader. It is part of the campaign to improve Dhlakama's image from that of a little known commander of a shadowy terror group to the leader of a bona fide political force. Dhlakama is seeking to win the status that Jonas Savimbi has in Angola.

Until recently Dhlakama rarely travelled from Renamo's Gorongosa stronghold and saw few outside visitors. Little is known about him except that in the late 1970s he defected from Frelimo to join the rebel group formed by the Rhodesian intelligence. Dhlakama received training from the Rhodesian SAS. When the South African military took over Renamo's reins in 1980, Dhlakama became its top commander. Roland Hunter, who was jailed for revealing the South African Defence Force's secret assistance to Renamo, tells of meeting monthly with Dhlakama in 1983/84 to hand over his R800 monthly salary and to deliver shipments of arms and ammunition. Under Dhlakama's command Renamo carried out numerous mass killings, mutilations and

torture of rural Mozambicans.

In the past year Dhlakama has taken grooming lessons and received new uniforms and business suits from his South African friends and far-right supporters in Europe. He toured Europe to meet the Italian prime minister, the Portuguese president and prime minister and senior American officials. Dhlakama also met former Zambian President Kenneth Kaunda in six sessions which, according to Harare diplomats were also set up by Lonrho.

Dhlakama's quest to transform himself from Mozambique's mutilator to a national politician may soon take him to Washington to meet President George Bush. The president could fend off any criticism for receiving a South African-backed terrorist by pointing to the fact that Dhlakama has already been accepted by Robert Mugabe, one of southern Africa's hardest-line leaders.

For his part, Mugabe may also be starting a new strategy of meeting regional foes that could see him meeting President FW de Klerk later this year. By meeting Dhlakama, Mugabe has demonstrated he will do whatever necessary to achieve a Mozambican settlement and that process could continue.

The international recognition for Dhlakama has been arranged as a strategy to boost Dhlakama's confidence so he will begin negotiating in earnest. But that assumption may be fatally flawed.

"Dhlakama has no background in diplomacy or politics," said a Mozambican analyst who has met the Renamo leader. "He only knows the tactics of a guerrilla fighter. His gut feeling about the Mugabe meeting may be that it simply proves that Renamo has the upper hand. If so he will continue business as usual and that means more blood for Mozambique."

So far the signs are not good. Renamo has delayed the tenth round of the Rome peace talks which were to have begun on January 15. Mozambican officials complain of Renamo's lack of good faith in the negotiations.

If high-level meetings and negotiations don't bring results, what can succeed in bringing peace to Mozambique?

Dhlakama has no interest in a swift transition period and elections, as is taking place in Angola. Renamo retains an odious reputation inside Mozambique that would translate into few election victories. Instead, Dhlakama is understood to be pressing for a lengthy transition period of at least two years during which he would have administrative authority over the large territories which Renamo controls. Such unelected power is what Dhlakama badly needs to effect the transition from terrorist to political leader.

The rebel leader is holding out for such an offer, and without that it appears no amount of meetings with heads of state will bring success to the Mozambican negotiations. Until he gets what he wants, Dhlakama is holding the region to ransom.

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