

Impasse at peace talks

Like virtually all its predecessors, the tenth round of peace talks between the Mozambican government and Renamo did not begin on the date scheduled. The talks were to have begun on 15 January, but the Renamo delegation did not arrive in Rome on that date, allegedly because of transport difficulties.

Supposedly the delegation for the talks was unable to leave a Renamo base in central Mozambique because of heavy rains. This is exactly the same excuse that Renamo used for its delay in appearing at the ninth round of talks in November, and it is less than credible.

January is the height of the rainy season in central Mozambique, so there is nothing surprising or abnormal about heavy rains in the Renamo strongholds south of the Zambezi river. Rain would not stop the Renamo delegation walking to Malawi, the country through which they normally transit en route to Rome, though it might make it difficult for light planes to land if the plan was to airlift the delegation out of Mozambique.

The talks did not begin until 22 January. Before his departure for Rome on the night of 20 January, the chief government negotiator, Transport Minister Armando Guebuza, told reporters that, contrary to initial expectations, the tenth round would not deal with military matters (such as the mechanisms for forming a single, non-party army). Instead, it would simply conclude the discussions on "political issues" begun at the ninth round. Essentially, this part of the agenda concerns a new electoral law, and

the timetable for Mozambique's first multi-party elections.

Mr Guebuza said that, at the last minute, Renamo had suddenly announced that it was not yet ready to discuss the military points on the agenda. Thus the idea of including military experts in the government delegation had to be dropped.

Asked whether he expected peace to be achieved this year, Mr Guebuza declined to make any prediction. He pointed out that, back in 1990, Renamo had claimed that the only significant obstacle to a peace accord was the presence of Zimbabwean troops.

So an agreement was signed on 1 December 1990 restricting Zimbabwean forces in Mozambique to the two rail corridors linking Zimbabwe to the Indian Ocean. But this did not bring peace any nearer, as Renamo found more and more reasons to prolong the negotiations.

Mr Guebuza noted that in 1991 months had been spent simply discussing the law on political parties: even though, in December 1990, Renamo had given its assent to the text that was approved by the Mozambican parliament, the Assembly of the Republic.

The talks were based on a document drawn up by the Italian government and Catholic Church mediators dealing mainly with a new electoral law. Renamo swiftly issued a counter-proposal, which contained several demands which the government found unacceptable and undemocratic.

Mugabe meets with Dhlakama

Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe met with Renamo commander-in-chief Afonso Dhlakama in Malawi on 10 January - the first time that any president of the front line states had come face to face with Dhlakama.

After the meeting, Mr Mugabe told Zimbabwean reporters that Dhlakama "is talking peace and expresses his desire for peace".

He said that his first impression of Dhlakama was that "he is a man with some ideas who is anxious that the position of Renamo be assured". He added generously "he is a man of integrity".

Clearly the question of the 5,000 or so Zimbabwean troops guarding the Beira and Limpopo rail corridors was discussed. Mr Mugabe made it clear that these troops would only be withdrawn once the peace negotiations "have been completed".

The meeting with Dhlakama had obviously been agreed to at discussions between Mr Mugabe and President Joaquim Chissano in Beira on 23 December, and on 20 January Mr Chissano flew to Harare to receive a briefing on the meeting from his Zimbabwean counterpart.

After an hour and a half meeting with Mr Mugabe, the Mozambican leader told journalists that contacts between Mr Mugabe and Malawian President Kamuzu Banda with Dhlakama would continue, but that the time was not ripe for him to meet with Dhlakama.

"The talks in Rome are going to continue", he said. "Then we will see when it is necessary for a constructive and positive meeting between me and Dhlakama. The meeting cannot happen and end up in failure. That would be disastrous for the peace process".

Chissano attacks Renamo delaying tactics

Mozambican President Joaquim Chissano, in a New Year message broadcast to the nation on 31 December, blamed the "delaying tactics" of Renamo for the failure to secure a ceasefire in 1991.

"During the past year we tried all means at our disposal to convince Renamo to be more serious in the negotiations", said Mr Chissano, "so that peace could be achieved in the shortest possible time".

In nine rounds of peace talks held in Rome, the government had shown great flexibility, and this had led to the signing of two protocols - one in October on basic political principles, and one in November on the mechanisms for the formation and registration of political parties.

"I would like to have gone much further", said Mr Chissano. "I would like to be able to speak to you today with a ceasefire already signed. That has not been possible due to the delaying and diversionary tactics used by Renamo with the sole purpose of holding back the process".

He attacked the "destabilising actions of Renamo" which "have continued to be the scourge of our people, with attacks against villages, trains, vehicles and other social and economic targets".

He noted that some of Renamo's raids had taken place inside the Beira and Limpopo rail corridors, in violation of the December 1990 agreement under which Renamo pledged to cease all operations against these strategic routes.

Mr Chissano pledged that in 1992 the government would continue its efforts to end the war as soon as possible. "We hope that Renamo will stop using delaying tactics in the negotiations, and will listen to the voice of the people", he said. "We want peace: a just, dignified, genuine and lasting peace".

On 4 January, at the traditional New Year reception given for the diplomatic corps, Mr Chissano warned that "without peace, all the efforts undertaken to offer millions of Mozambicans prospects other than violence, destruction and insecurity, are not viable", and urged the international community "to continue giving unconditional support to the aspirations for peace for the Mozambican people".

The Renamo delegation demanded that the elections should be held by proportional representation in multi-member constituencies. Although this will probably require a constitutional amendment (the constitution currently says "results of elections shall be established according to the system of majority vote" - which is interpreted as meaning a first-past-the-post system), the government did not object to this.

But Renamo then went on to deny the very purpose of proportional representation by seeking an extraordinarily high threshold before a party could gain any representation in the new parliament.

Renamo proposed setting the threshold at 20 per cent - any party winning fewer votes than this would not receive any seats. The Mozambican electorate is estimated at around eight million; Renamo's proposal would mean that a party could receive over one and a half million votes and still have no members of parliament.

Renamo also proposed that coalitions, whether for electoral campaigns or for the formation of a government, should be banned by law. AIM is not aware of any country where coalitions are banned: the host country for the talks, Italy, has been governed by coalitions for most of the last 50 years.

A further proposal the government found objectionable was a demand that the future parliament should, as its first priority, even before a new government is sworn in, amend the constitution. The government did not see how the Rome talks

could possibly dictate priorities to a sovereign body that has not even been elected yet. The government has no objection to constitutional amendments, provided these are carried out within the terms of the constitution, but argued that any parliament must be free to set its own priorities.

On the age at which citizens can be elected to parliament, Renamo also took a restrictive position. It proposed that while the voting age should be 18, only those citizens older than 25 should be eligible for election. Renamo argued that while 18 year olds may have sufficient responsibility to vote, they may not possess the "maturity" required of a member of parliament.

The government pointed out that the Mozambican population is overwhelmingly young, with a relatively short life expectancy. These factors made the Renamo proposal "unrealistic".

An interview given to AIM by the head of the Renamo delegation, Raul Domingos, shed some light onto Renamo thinking on the elections, notably its attempt to marginalise all newly emerging non-violent opposition parties.

Domingos said there should be a "barrier" to prevent "a proliferation of unrepresentative parties". He justified this position on the grounds that a future parliament would find it difficult to function and take decisions if it were full of small parties.

The ban on coalitions, he said, was designed to prevent the ruling Frelimo Party from entering into

alliances with "phoney parties, created merely to divide other opposition forces".

Thus Domingos came close to admitting that Renamo is still trying to force Mozambican politics into a bipolar mould, to reduce a multi-party system to a two-party system - itself and Frelimo. Persistently, Renamo has dismissed the new opposition parties as "satellites" of Frelimo, without producing any evidence for this conspiracy theory.

As for the timing of the general elections, the two sides had agreed in December that these would be held within a year of a ceasefire. But Renamo now backtracked, and suggested that a clause be inserted into the election law whereby the elections could be postponed if the time allocated was considered to be "insufficient" for all the preparations.

The government did not agree that a year could possibly be "insufficient". Throughout the negotiations the government had been trying, without success, to hold Renamo to specific timetables. To admit the possibility of postponing the elections would open the door to indefinite delay.

For Renamo, the management and control of the entire electoral process should be in the hands of a national election commission formed by representatives of all the parties that are standing; the government would only have a significant role in logistical matters.

The government regards this as yet another Renamo attempt to chip away at its sovereignty. It regards any such national commission as a state, and not a party body, and as such its members should be appointed by the government. The role of political parties should be to safeguard against any electoral malpractice by ensuring that their members are posted to the supervisory bodies at all the polling stations.

With the talks near deadlock, the United States intervened, just as it had in the eighth round in October 1991. The Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Jeffrey Davidow, flew to Rome and met separately with both delegations on 31 January. According to sources in Washington, he was bearing messages to both sides expressing the United States' impatience at the slow pace of the negotiations.

The same sources said that the American diplomat had also asked for a direct meeting with the Renamo commander, Afonso Dhlakama. Incredibly, Dhlakama snubbed Davidow, saying that the moment was "not opportune" for a meeting.

Davidow struck an optimistic note at the meetings, and sources close to the talks told AIM that he had expressed satisfaction at the progress since October (referring to the protocols signed in October and November on general political principles and on the mechanisms for forming and registering political parties).

He claimed to have noted "a change of attitude" on the part of Renamo, that was now taking a more constructive approach to the talks.