

Playing for time in Rome

Despite the promises of "peace by Xmas", made in Lisbon last November by Renamo leader Afonso Dhlakama, there is still no sign of an end to Renamo's unremitting violence against the civilian population of Mozambique.

Massacres are carried out with gruesome details that would have delighted the Marquis de Sade. Thus when Radio Mozambique journalists saw the pile of 16 corpses that Renamo had left at Chonguene on the country's main north-south road in mid-January, they found that the penises of the male victims had been cut off and placed in their mouths.

While terror and torture remain the order of the day for Renamo units on the ground, in Rome peace talks ground to a halt in January because of a series of demands which show either that Renamo has not the faintest idea how democratic politics work, or that their negotiators are once again stalling, playing for time.

Take the demand that coalitions be proscribed by law. This is an extraordinary attempt to limit the freedom of political parties, to prevent them from working together and presenting joint platforms to the electorate.

It might also make stable government impossible. If no party gains over half the seats in a new parliament, and coalitions are outlawed, then the alternative is a weak minority government, which could be toppled at any moment. As Renamo should know, if it made any study of democratic systems, coalition governments are a frequent occurrence (notably in Italy, the country hosting the peace talks).

Renamo favours proportional representation (PR) for Mozambique's elections. There's nothing wrong with that in principle, of course, but PR systems often lead directly to coalitions.

Renamo seems not to understand the reasoning behind PR: the idea is to ensure that parties are represented in parliament in more or less the same proportions that the electorate cast their votes. Thus if a party wins ten per cent of the national vote, and there are 250 seats in parliament, it ought to end up with 25 seats.

But Renamo calls for a threshold of 20 per cent of the votes before a party could win any seats at all. That negates the whole purpose of PR, which is to ensure that smaller parties are not prejudiced, and that the voters' wishes are reflected as truly as possible within parliament.

Renamo openly admits that it is trying to marginalise the newly-formed non-violent opposition parties. Voters who are opposed to the ruling Frelimo Party, may well prefer a peaceful right-wing organisation, to one whose hands are soaked in blood.

But the demand the government found hardest to take was Renamo's insistence that the new electoral law stipulate that the first priority of a future parliament will be to amend the constitution. This denies the principle that parliaments are sovereign bodies that fix their own agenda.

Naturally parliament may amend the constitution if it so desires, and the constitution envisages mechanisms for this. But the Rome talks are about ending the war: they cannot legitimately be used to tell future Mozambican legislators what they can and cannot do.

Furthermore, in terms of the existing constitution, draft constitutional amendments must be submitted 90 days before the opening of debate. They thus could not be dealt with immediately a new parliament was elected - unless, that is, Renamo is suggesting violating the current constitution. Under the protocol signed with the government in October, Renamo undertook, once a ceasefire takes effect, to respect the country's laws (including, naturally, the source of all laws, the constitution).

There is nothing new in Renamo breaking its word, of course. Thus Renamo has repeatedly attacked the Limpopo and Beira rail corridors despite a specific undertaking not to do so given in the agreement of 1 December 1990.

Sadly, the Renamo negotiators' behaviour in Rome once more indicates that pledges given by Renamo are not worth the paper they are written on.