

Mozambique

The unanswered Chimoio question

FROM A SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT IN MOZAMBIQUE

TO UNDERSTAND why Mozambique's 12-year civil war continues, look no further than Chimoio, once a sleepy town of 50,000 and a fuelling stop for Rhodesians heading for the beaches of Beira. These days the population is closer to 500,000, thanks to the refugees who have flocked to the city, which lies along the road and railway corridor linking landlocked Zimbabwe to the Indian Ocean. For the past year Mozambique's Renamo rebels have mostly honoured a ceasefire along this corridor (and the Limpopo railway corridor), making Chimoio a safe haven.

So far, these two ceasefire agreements are the only achievements from the 19 months of peace talks that have taken place in Rome between Renamo and the Frelimo government of President Joaquim Chissano. They have not stopped Renamo from attacking the squatter camps around Chimoio in recent weeks, stealing food and clothes and kidnapping young men to serve in rebel ranks. No one is certain whether the attackers are hungry bandits or an organised Renamo unit; or why they are breaking the ceasefire now.

Since assuming the presidency in 1986, Mr Chissano has rejected Marxism, introduced a free press and independent judiciary, installed an IMF structural-adjustment programme and at the same time met Renamo's demands for a multi-party democracy and free-market economy. This has won him the support of the United States and Britain. But Renamo's leader, Afonso Dhlakama, has now expanded his demands to include a system of proportional representation and pre-election administrative

control over the areas he now controls.

The talks in Rome, however, are only loosely attached to the facts on the ground. It is far from clear that anybody is capable of making Renamo agree to a ceasefire. The force was set up in 1976 by the former white regime in Rhodesia and used against the Marxist Mozambican regime, which sheltered Rhodesia's black guerrillas. When Rhodesia became Zimbabwe in 1980, South Africa took over the arming and training of Renamo, in the name of anti-communism. With the help of South African weapons and training, Renamo destroyed railways and communications, leaving much of the Mozambican countryside without any effective government.

The South Africans now say that they have ended all assistance to Renamo. Some evidence suggests otherwise. It is possible that the South African army, or parts of it, are still delivering weapons and food without the full knowledge of their political masters. In an atmosphere of continuing lawlessness, these provisions may be keeping rebel bands (like those near Chimoio) in business.

Without its great ally to organise and direct it, however, large chunks of Renamo may no longer know whether to keep fighting or not. In Chimoio recently an aid worker who drove a kilometre too far beyond the airport was suddenly surrounded by some 50 Renamo rebels. Knowing the group's reputation, he prepared himself for the worst. Instead, the rebels' leader sat down and asked him what he thought of the Rome talks. His group wanted peace, but did not understand what was holding up negotiations, and had decided that an ambush was the only way to get an outsiders' opinion.



A truce agreed, not achieved