

20 May 1992
Peace

SARDC SPECIAL REPORTS

Mozambique Peace Talks

SR10 920520

ROME 'PEACE' TALKS MAY FINALLY DISCUSS PEACE

There could be some new faces at the Mozambique peace talks in Rome scheduled to resume later this month, and the agenda item for discussion, finally, should be military matters including a ceasefire.

However, this does not signal an imminent end to the protracted negotiations.

After almost two years of avoiding this discussion, the Mozambique National Resistance (MNR or Renamo) has run out of excuses for not dealing with the main issue at the talks - war, and peace.

Their insistence on first discussing the suspension of some articles of the constitution, in defiance of an agenda agreed between the two sides in May last year, appears to have been overcome in a meeting in late April in Malawi between the US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Herman Cohen, and the MNR leader, Afonso Dhlakama.

A communique released after their meeting said that they agreed to delay the constitutional issue for discussion under the final agenda item -- "Guarantees".

In fact, this development favours MNR and will increase pressure on the government team to deal quickly with these constitutional demands. After reaching agreement on the mechanics of a ceasefire, government negotiators will want to complete the remaining agenda as quickly as possible so as not to delay the implementation of a peace accord.

Senior Mozambican officials, and many Western diplomats, believe that most of the issues raised by MNR at the Rome talks have been simply delaying tactics because MNR leaders and their backers know they cannot win a free and fair election, and because the peace process in Mozambique remains inextricably linked to progress in the current negotiations in South Africa.

When the talks resume, the MNR delegation led by the Secretary for Organization, Raul Domingos, will have to consider whether to accept the presence of British and French, as well as Portuguese and US, observers for the discussion on military matters.

They have to accept the Portuguese presence, from whom they have had favourable consideration and support, particularly from Portuguese military intelligence, which has close links with its counterpart in South Africa. The government of Anibal Cavaco Silva has been more guarded in its approach, allowing Dhlakama to visit Lisbon late last year when he said that peace could be achieved more quickly if the Portuguese became directly involved in the talks.

Equally, MNR must the presence of the United States, which is already the de facto facilitator of the talks. However, they are not enthusiastic about the presence of French and British observers, the latter of which has a government programme of military training.

The MNR and its backers have tried to delay this discussion on military matters as long as possible, and have refused to consider a proposal by President Joaquim Alberto Chissano for a truce during ceasefire discussions.

Even now, two months after the last round of talks ended in Rome, they have continued to stall, preventing the fixing of a date for the 11th round of talks to begin.

Instead, MNR has stepped up attacks on civilians in three southern provinces (Gaza, Inhambane and Maputo) and in Nampula and Zambezia in the northern part of the country.

One senior Western military official, who is a member of the Joint Verification Commission (JVC) which nominally oversees the 18-month-old ceasefire along two transport corridors, was quite blunt in his assessment recently.

"Dhlakama knows he can't win an election, but he can't win the war either," he said. "What is Renamo without guns?" And this seems to be the problem.

The MNR was created as a surrogate force by Rhodesian intelligence in the 1970s, and handed over to South African military intelligence when Zimbabwe became independent in 1980. When the South African Defence Force (SADF) took over formal control of MNR, they greatly expanded its destructive capacity, ordering an assault on economic targets such as railways and powerlines. Senior South African officials have admitted this and there are a vast array of witnesses and captured documents, which also show that the SADF breached the 1984 Nkomati Accord as soon as it was signed.

Assistance continues to flow to MNR from South Africa, according to many eyewitnesses who have escaped recently from military camps or been captured, and are able to describe locations and activities at those bases. They speak of South African military vehicles and helicopters ferrying personnel across the frontier, of wildlife poaching by whites who have crossed the border, of military training and arms drops.

Diplomats say that while this assistance may not be coming directly from the South Africa government, it is most likely originating from the military establishment which has for many years funded covert operations in Mozambique and elsewhere in the region. Proponents of this theory anticipate that the power of the current military establishment in South Africa is being curtailed by the negotiating process and should be further eroded by the installation of an interim government.

While the South African objective of destroying the country's economic base has been achieved, the MNR has used such brutal force against the local population, including unimaginable atrocities, that it does not have a large popular base.

A human rights report released in February this year by the US State Department attributed the "vast majority" of atrocities to MNR which, it said, "regularly holds civilians against their will, often employing them as porters or forcibly impressing them into its military forces".

Despite gaining support in some districts due to local grievances, the MNR has not been able to build a national following. Attempts to transform it into a political party have failed to date, and it has not been able to produce a credible political manifesto.

MNR leaflets circulating in Maputo, and quoted by the national news agency, AIM, say that the urban network is based in the central city of Beira. The leaflets urge Beira members to visit other cities in order to create political commissions and coordinating committees to supervise political activities. The leaflets call for a recruitment drive to achieve targets of 3,000 to 4,000 active members in each of the cities. "You should try to recruit people with lots of experience, such as church leaders and company managers," say the documents.

Rather like the Contras in Nicaragua, MNR could be sidelined by its main backers in favour of an opposition party or 'third force', if it is unable to appear politically credible. The government of the ruling Frelimo party has also made diplomatic inroads with MNR allies, such as South Africa, and has a broader base of popular support within the country.

All this means that - unlike Angola where both main protagonists believe they can win an election - MNR knows it cannot and therefore has little interest in such a process. During the protracted negotiations in Rome, MNR negotiators have variously demanded that elections be postponed, that they be given places in an appointed coalition government, and that coalitions of other parties be outlawed.

It continues to insist that one year should elapse between a ceasefire declaration and general elections.

The MNR national council issued a communique in early April containing a new set of demands. In addition to its insistence on constitutional talks in Rome (rather than by an elected assembly), the document said that all refugees must remain outside the country until after a ceasefire, that a future national army should number less than 26,000 of which half would be from their military forces, and that remaining troops from both sides "will be immediately demobilised".

The document says that MNR should be allowed to continue to administer the zones it currently occupies, even after a ceasefire, but does not specify which zones are referred to or whether other political parties would be allowed to operate in that territory.

The final demand from the MNR national council is that the European Community should provide it with funds. So persistent is this demand for funds from governments or multi-national corporations that it has become a factor in the bargaining.

The senior US negotiator, Herman Cohen, told a press conference in Maputo last month after meeting President Chissano and other senior government officials, that a ceasefire is now more urgent than ever because of the crippling drought gripping much of the country.

'Continued fighting will make it difficult to deliver assistance to Mozambicans facing famine,' he said, announcing an increase in US emergency food aid between now and September to 300,000 tonnes valued at US\$ 70 million.

Last December the United Nations estimated that 1.8 million internally displaced Mozambicans were in need of food aid, but since then the seasonal rains have failed over most of the country.

A UN appeal released in mid-May has added a further "1.3 million people in drought-stricken areas whose crops have failed and who will therefore need relief food supplies, bringing to 3.15 million the total number facing famine."

The appeal document notes that the main cause of the famine is the war waged by MNR and that safe passage of relief convoys is a major problem. Thirteen food trucks were burnt out in the drought zones in March and April, according to reports in the local media. A Renamo commander who surrendered in March, in the central province of Manica, confessed to taking part in an ambush of vehicles carrying food aid a few weeks earlier.

Many of the 3 million people in need of food relief may be out of reach of assistance due to war-damaged roads, bridges and vehicles, and security. Yet MNR leaders have refused to consider President Chissano's proposal for a temporary truce during ceasefire discussions, or specially protected "corridors of peace" for the delivery of food aid.

Instead they have escalated their attacks in advance of this round of talks. A Catholic priest, two nuns and 23 lay catechists have been killed in the southern provinces in this period, and hundreds of civilians. The suburbs of main cities have been targeted for attack.

More than 50 people have been killed, and many others wounded, assaulted or abducted, in the outlying suburbs of Maputo since January in attacks by large groups of young boys, with a few adult commanders. Many residents flee into the city each night in search of safety for themselves and their children.

Phyllis Johnson

20 May 1992