

Renamo accused of gross abuse in Mozambique war

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AS the prospects brighten for an agreement between the Frelimo government and the Renamo rebels, a report says both sides have been responsible for human rights abuses but that Renamo has committed the large majority of gross abuses.

In a report published today, Africa Watch, the US-based human rights group, says: "In general it is undoubtedly the case that Renamo has been guilty of a wider range of abuses than the government and FAM (the Mozambique army); the abuses have been on a larger scale, more frequent, more systematic and with less recourse to justice for the victims."

Renamo, the report says, mutilates civilians by cutting off their ears, noses, lips and sexual organs. These are not isolated incidents, the report says, and they are continuing.

On progress towards a democratic system of government which respects civil and political rights, the report has this to say: "Considerable progress has occurred but the record is not unblemished and significant areas of concern remain."

In an important breakthrough at the weekend, President Joachim Chissano agreed to meet Afonso Dhlakama, the Renamo leader. The meeting has not yet been fixed but it may pave the way for a ceasefire after 16 years of war.

The two sides have held talks in Rome for two years.

The government has continually made concessions and Renamo has progressively changed its demands.

Diplomats and others dealing with Mozambique say Renamo is still being supplied with weapons from South Africa, with or without the knowledge and approval of the South African Government.

But even if a ceasefire is agreed it is unlikely to relieve the desperate straits of people in the Mozambique countryside which is suffering its third successive year of drought.

North of the Beira corridor, Renamo may be able to control its forces but in the south there are wandering armed gangs of bandits with no allegiance except to themselves. It will take more than a formal ceasefire to end their violence, while many of the roads needed for food distribution are mined.

The Africa Watch report says: "The manner in which the war has been fought has been a major contributor to the chronic famine which has afflicted the country since the early 1980s." About 3.5-million people are now affected, many of them — driven from their land by war — are eating roots and leaves. — The Independent