

Danger that shadows the ceasefire

THE Mozambican peace talks have resumed in Rome with a new sense of urgency, for now the negotiators are chasing the deadline for agreement that was set by the leaders of the Frelimo government and the Renamo rebels in their historic meeting last week.

However, the negotiations will continue to be shadowed by uncertainty over whether it will be physically possible to stop the violence in Mozambique even if a ceasefire agreement is reached between the two parties.

Much of the violence has no political character at all. It is sheer banditry by gunmen owing no firm allegiance to either party and beyond the control of any authority.

There are simply too many loose guns in Mozambique — AK47 assault rifles in the hands of men who may once have been Renamo guerrillas and may still from time to time see themselves in that role; other AKs wielded by men who see the guns as their only means of gaining a livelihood; still other AKs held by members of the government army who sometimes use their weapons to take food and money from civilians when their own army fails to pay or feed them.

Controlling and perhaps disarming the disaffected soldiers will be a relatively easy matter. Getting the semi-guerrillas or the outright bandits to stop their looting and killing will be much more difficult and nobody has yet come up with any ideas on how it might be done.

First, however, the fighting between Frelimo and Renamo must be ended and the negotiators in Rome have seven weeks in which to do it. When they entered the Rome peace talks two years ago each party in effect acknowledged its inability to win a military victory. This has now been confirmed by the agreement reached last weekend between President Joaquim Chissano and Renamo leader Afonso Dhlakama.

By October 1 the negotiators in Rome must find agreement on the two main issues still dividing them: firstly, whether elections should take place under the present constitution or a new one; secondly, how the two opposing forces should be welded together in a single national army.

The third main obstacle to agreement — guarantees sought by Renamo of the security of its members after they have laid down their arms — has been partly addressed by the Rome agreement. The rebels will want it made firmer before they sign a ceasefire.

When the negotiators resumed their meetings on Monday following the departure of their leaders they took up the issue of the composition of the armed forces and reports from Rome suggest they may already be close to agreement on it. Members of the Frelimo team were reported to have said there were "more convergent than divergent points".

The constitutional issue may be more difficult to resolve. Earlier in the negotiations it was broached but proved so intractable that it was put aside while the negotiators took up the military issue.

Renamo had insisted on the constitution being changed before elections are held, which would be a lengthy process

Negotiators in Rome are racing the clock to arrange a ceasefire in the Mozambican civil war. But another problem waits in the background. GERALD L'ANGE, editor of the Argus Africa News Service, reports from Johannesburg.



Mozambique's President Joaquim Chissano and Renamo leader Afonso Dhlakama embrace after signing the ceasefire agreement.

that could not possibly be completed within the next two months. The rebels' undertaking to sign a ceasefire by October 1 suggests therefore that it already has tacitly accepted Frelimo's stand that the first step to any other agreement must be a ceasefire.

Speaking in Nairobi on his way back to the Mozambican bush from Rome, Dhlakama said he was "in total control" of his forces and they would stop fighting on October 1. This implies that, had he wished, he would have been able to prevent his guerrillas from carrying out the atrocities against civilians for which they have been blamed.

Dhlakama is not on record as having condemned the atrocities or having demanded that they cease. He has only denied that his forces were responsible for them. The evidence is overwhelming, however, that most of the atrocities — the killing, mutilation and abduction of civilians, including women and children — have been carried out in Renamo's name.

Some of the atrocities may have been perpetrated by straightforward bandits claiming to represent Renamo but this is unlikely. Bandits would probably be more interested in food and loot than mutilation.

Invariably the atrocities have been inflicted by men claiming to represent Renamo and who accused their victims of allegiance to Frelimo. The motive, twisted though it might be, was to weaken support for the government and intimidate civilians into supporting Renamo.

If all those who carried out these atrocities are disowned by Renamo then the problem of disarming and pacifying them becomes even greater. Worse, the less control there is over the loose guns the more difficult it will be to maintain the ceasefire. How will government forces know whether attacks have been launched by bandits or by Renamo in breach of the ceasefire?

The first element in any lasting settlement, however, must be the political will of the two parties to achieve it. Once that seed has been planted — as it appears to have been in Rome — it becomes possible for the other parts of a settlement to grow from there.

The ground was prepared not only by the realisation that there can be no military victory but also by growing international pressure and by the disintegration of the economy — a process speeded by the vicious drought now gripping Mozambique.

It is perhaps a sign of promise that the Lonrho corporation's head, Tiny Rowland, has become closely involved in the settlement efforts. He is given much of the credit for bringing about the meeting between Chissano and Dhlakama, which was their first. Mr Rowland, whose company has big commercial interests in Mozambique as in other African countries, had previously stayed aloof from the negotiations.

The fact that he has now plunged in suggests that he believes that a settlement of the 16-year-old civil war has become possible and he wants to be well placed to harvest some of its benefits.

There will be benefits aplenty from a settlement, not least for South Africa. But they will not come immediately. Mozambique's economy has been so deeply ravaged that it will take years to repair the damage. Gradually, however, the country could build up a tourist trade that could become its biggest revenue earner. It has in addition strong agricultural and some mineral potential.

In the rebuilding of the economy, construction and engineering will undoubtedly boom, taking advantage of foreign aid funds and, to a lesser extent, foreign investment that will begin to enter the country once it is seen to be at peace and stable.