

AFRICA



Brothers in arms ... President Joaquim Chissano and Renamo's Afonso Dhlakama embrace after signing the provisional accord in Rome

Photo: AP

Mozambique hesitates on burning its bridges

EVEN the American diplomats who likened Renamo's fondness for slaughter to that of the disciplined Khmer Rouge never doubted that most of Mozambique's rebels were more than a loose collection of bandits.

The roving guerrillas proved invaluable in pursuing the Renamo hierarchy's campaign of destabilising the government by wrecking their country's fragile infrastructure and terrorising the civilian population.

But Renamo leader Afonso Dhlakama's lack of direct control over his troops raises serious doubts about his ability to rein them in under the ceasefire agreed last week.

Under the provisional accord between Dhlakama and President Joaquim Chissano in Rome, a halt to the fighting will be called on October 1, provided a number of important but resolvable differences are ironed out. If it happens, it will bring an end not just to the carnage that has claimed

Mozambique's leaders have agreed to a ceasefire — but why are they hesitant about putting it into effect?

CHRIS MCGREAL reports

upwards of one million lives in a country of just 15-million people, but some relief from the devastating drought suffered by hundreds of thousands of people in areas where aid agencies have been unable to work because of the war.

The reservations about the ceasefire were expressed by Mozambique's largest newspaper, *Noticias*, which greeted the news with the subdued headline: "Understanding reached on ending war in Mozambique".

Chissano offered Dhlakama an immediate ceasefire last week. The Renamo leader declined, saying he wanted guarantees for the political

freedom and the safety of his supporters. But Dhlakama also conceded he could not guarantee that Renamo commanders would immediately heed orders to stop the killing, let alone the men under them.

Chissano himself faces problems with discipline. Some of his army commanders have profited considerably from the war and are reported by diplomats to be hesitant about the ceasefire. Elite troops went on strike last month over conditions and the military has been behind several large raids on food convoys to drought areas.

The severity of the drought may be what finally pushed the two sides to agreement. The rebels relied on provisions offered or taken from villages in the areas through which they move. In regions under regular Renamo control, the civilian populations worked to keep the rebels fed. Those who tried to leave were often killed. But the drought has left many rural Mozambicans unable to feed themselves, let alone the guerrillas.

In the driest central and southern

areas, hunger has suppressed fear. People in search of food are flocking from rebel strongholds to areas where aid agencies work, in such large numbers that Renamo simply cannot prevent it any longer. Many rebels have apparently been left unable to sustain themselves.

It may be that Renamo's soldiers can be induced to give up the fight with an offer of food. Or, as in Angola, the crisis and further collapse of order might encourage soldiers on both sides to go freelance and take what they can at gunpoint.

The government can take cold comfort from Renamo's problems. It has won few friends among the masses for its inability to address the pending famine that aid agencies estimate threatens as many as three million people.

Even before the full ceasefire goes into effect, Renamo wants various demands met. Earlier protocols resolved the election issue, with a vote due within one year of a ceasefire. But in the interim, the rebels want suspension of constitutional articles permitting the government to ban political parties that "disturb social harmony", and new legislation restricting arbitrary arrest.

Over the next six weeks, the two sides also have to resolve differences over the composition of a new national army and the role of the once-Marxist government's secret police. Dhlakama has expressed concern about mechanisms to prevent violations of the ceasefire. He fears the government will attempt to move Renamo out of the areas it controls after the ceasefire.

Dhlakama has also voiced concern

about where he will find the finances for a political campaign against a government with resources at its fingertips.

Tiny Rowland, chief executive of British consortium Lonrho, may provide the answer. Lonrho has extensive interests in Mozambique and Rowland has been praised by both sides for his key role in brokering the peace deal by helping to persuade Chissano to meet Dhlakama. Whispers among the diplomats at the meeting suggest financial guarantees were offered to Renamo.

The differences over the issues still to be settled are not so wide as to scuttle the ceasefire, unless Dhlakama finds his commanders and men either unwilling or unable to enforce the ceasefire. But if the Renamo leader is looking for a way out of the agreement, the door is still open.