

The landscape after battle



Chissano and Dhlakama shake hands and cross fingers

IT COULD be the beginning of the end. In Rome on August 5th, President Joaquim Chissano, leader of Mozambique's ruling Frelimo party, reached out his hand towards Afonso Dhlakama, leader of the Renamo rebel movement. Cameras flashed; the hands met. A couple of days later the two men agreed on a ceasefire to start on October 1st. Mozambique's brutal 17-year civil war is not over, but, for the first time since peace talks began in Rome two years ago, the leaders agreed to agree.

The handshake signified more than a turn in Mozambique's fortunes. With South Africa defused and Angola pacified, a halt to the fighting in Mozambique would bring a formal end to the proxy cold war that fed Southern Africa's civil conflicts for two decades. But the peace may not last. Mozambique's sad history proves that wars can create warriors: soldiers, even those fed and inspired by outsiders, will acquire their own motives to continue the battle.

The war's origins date back to the 1960s, when the liberation movement Frelimo, led by the late Samora Machel, began its ten-year battle against Portugal's lacklustre colonial regime, securing communist backing

and adopting policies to match. After the collapse of the Portuguese regime in 1975, Machel offered his country as a base for rebellion against the white regime in Rhodesia. To fight Frelimo, the Rhodesians founded Renamo. Then, when Rhodesia became Zimbabwe, South Africa took up the cause, pouring money into the rebel movement to frustrate the potential black alliance to its north.

The ideological allegiances of Mozambique's warring factions were always tenuous. Some angry peasants joined Renamo after traditional leaders were murdered in the name of Marxist progress; most were attracted by South African guns, money, and food. Some idealists joined Frelimo because they believed in the redistribution of wealth; others were drawn by aid from the Soviet Union and, later, from western donors. Both sides were armed to the teeth.

With time and Soviet collapse, the ideological differences disintegrated altogether. Mr Chissano, leader of Frelimo since Machel died in a mysterious crash over South Africa in 1986, developed into an economic reformer who won many western friends. South Africa, for its part, said it

would stop arming Renamo.

But the battle continued, because peace was not in everyone's interest. Soldiers on both sides feared losing their guns. For some, they were the implements for enforcing local protection rackets; for others, the only means of getting food. Renamo's leaders, fearing that their movement's bloody reputation would not help them win elections, preferred to prolong the war and entrench their own positions.

It has long been doubtful whether Renamo's forces in northern Mozambique have much to do with those in the south. Both can be deadly. Bandits calling themselves Renamo units have looted villages and city suburbs in recent months. The question is whether Frelimo is much more coherent than its opponent. Mr Chissano's government, desperately short of money, has not been paying or feeding its troops. Some—including men from units trained with British help, allegedly the country's elite—recently went on a two-week strike, blocking railways and roads. The president's parsimonious economic programme is not loved by his army.

Mediation has continued since 1987, egged on by Tiny Rowland, the veteran chief executive of Lonrho, who owns mines and farms in Mozambique and put his company jet at Mr Dhlakama's disposal. Mr Rowland enlisted several African leaders in the quest for peace, which nevertheless seemed hopeless at first. Mr Chissano resisted a personal meeting, fearing it would give the tainted Renamo leader legitimacy; Mr Dhlakama wanted advance guarantees about the post-war electoral process.

Agreement was eventually reached with the help of President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, who spent years in Mozambique as a freedom-fighter. Italian negotiators struggled with ceasefire agreements. At last both leaders, humbled by this year's harsh drought, took the road to Rome.

In Maputo, reaction to the news was muted. The weeks leading up to the October ceasefire will surely be violent, as both sides try to win territory that they can hold on to after peace breaks out. Guns are plentiful; killing has become commonplace; the habits of peace will be hard to acquire.

The landscape after battle is a bleak one. A quarter of Mozambique's 15m people are refugees, most major roads and railways have been destroyed, living standards are as low as anywhere in the world. Mozambique has gold, coal, oil, fertile land and valuable ports. But after an unusually cruel and cynical war recovery will not be swift.