

Millions of Mozambicans are starving as drought and war continue

Exhaustion may end the fighting

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DESPITE a new ceasefire aimed at ending Mozambique's 16-year war, government troops and rebels are still exchanging gunfire and millions of people, many risking starvation, are in the crossfire.

From peasants in the drought-scoured countryside to diplomats in the whitewashed villas of tropical Maputo, people are sceptical that the October 4 truce will end the war between the leftist government and right-wing rebels that claimed up to one million lives.

"There are no rules to this war," said Felice Dindo, head of the International Red Cross in Mozambique. "The ceasefire is only a technicality, nothing has really been settled. No one seems to be in control here."

When asked about peace prospects, United Nations special rep-

resentative Aldo Ajello smiled wryly and said: "The fighting seems to be going very well. We clearly need to start working on the peace process immediately".

He organised a meeting this week between government and rebel leaders to set up monitoring groups called for in the ceasefire agreement, signed in Rome after two years of negotiations.

Southern Africa is also suffering its worst drought this century — more than three million Mozambicans depend on food aid.

The rebels of Renamo have captured at least five areas since the ceasefire took effect.

President Joaquim Chissano's government called the attacks "a deliberate strategy of conquering territory and strategic positions".

But Anselmo Victor, Renamo's chief representative in Maputo, said the rebels attacked only after government troops moved into

repositions.

Renamo's attacks included the takeover of Angoche, a coastal city of some 200 000 people. But government forces last week recaptured the town and another smaller one.

Government soldiers, most untrained for months and not very effective fighters, have relied on superior numbers to defend major towns. They have never been able to track down rebels in the vast countryside, where most of Mozambique's 15 million people live. "There's no morale," said Sylvester Joaquim, a sergeant who served for nine years.

The larger cities on Mozambique's Indian Ocean coast are crowded with displaced people who fled their barren farmland for shanty camps in town.

"People are coming in to towns in desperation and in worse condition," said John Yale, who has

been in Mozambique since 1988 with World Vision, the US-based charity. "We're getting more and more reports of starvation, but it's not yet mass starvation."

The famine is most acute in the central provinces, where the rebels control many villages. Aid groups have been unable to enter because of the fighting.

Ajello, an Italian diplomat, has called for the warring parties to meet in Maputo, but Renamo has refused, complaining about a lack of proper housing and telephones for its officials.

Chissano's government is beyond bankrupt. Two-thirds of the country's income is foreign aid, mostly from Western nations.

Despite the shaky start, peace may yet come — if only because both sides have been exhausted by a war neither has been able to win. — Sapa-AP. □