

By BOBBIE JO KELSO

DEVELOPMENT organisations are scrambling to do what could have once been considered treason but is now widely regarded as the key to lasting peace in Mozambique: working with Renamo.

In the past week, several of these groups have met district commanders in the rebel army. Led by a United Nations representative others, such as Redd Barna (Norwegian Save the Children) and the Irish organisation Concern, are already working with Renamo to provide emergency assistance in isolated areas.

The catalyst is the need — and now the ability — to supply food and humanitarian aid in zones held by Renamo, with controls virtually everywhere but the nation's capital and urban centres.

The co-operation is not only helping rural Mozambicans, but revealing a large populace of Renamo supporters. Such teamwork could also eventually make or break the peace process.

A common belief, promoted by government reports, was that most citizens living in Renamo areas were prisoners throughout the 16-year war. It's a belief created by extensive propaganda, according to UN emergency operations co-ordinator Jean-Claude Legrand.

"It's definitely true there were some kept against their will, but there are many more who volunteer, are willing and want to be there," says Legrand, who oversees humanitarian aid actions in the Renamo zones of Mozambique's Manica and Sofala provinces.

He says instead often the government acts as captor, blocking citizens from returning to Renamo areas once they come into towns in search of drought assistance. This view is becoming increas-

The key to lasting peace: Aid to Renamo

ingly common now that relief workers are reaching Renamo areas, some of which had been isolated for more than a decade.

Since Renamo does not control any towns, Legrand's initial contact with its regional commanders takes place deep in the bush. In one case, he first walked five hours for a remote rendezvous. In another, Renamo escorts laboriously cleared a path for 17km alongside a main track ridden with land mines.

One group of relief organisations led by Legrand plans to distribute 910 tons of food to 70 000 people in Renamo areas this month. The recipient can include guerrillas, a move that helps keep the peace but one that makes some groups decidedly jumpy.

One group asked not to be named in media reports, but others say Renamo cadres must be viewed as ordinary citizens because of the demobilisation plan of the Rome peace accord signed in October. They, too, are reluctant to be perceived as working with what was often a viciously brutal rebel movement.

"It's just not something the donors want to hear, but it is happening," says

Ernst Schade, the resident representative of Redd Barna. "These days, we are being contacted by Renamo a lot because they know of our existence. They are looking for support and looking to have organisations in areas of their influence."

Private organisations are getting involved as well. One religious mission, Mafora Farm, is now openly admitting it supplied food and clothes to Renamo soldiers months before the ceasefire. Today, it has food relief and medical operations near Renamo's headquarters in the remote Gorongosa district.

That same area is also being targeted by the International Committee of the Red Cross which had been the only relief organisation officially allowed in Renamo areas until recently.

Still, the opportunity to work in these isolated zones doesn't come automatically with peace. First, bridges must be repaired and land mines removed — dangerous and slow work that relief workers hope will be speeded up by four UN mine experts who arrived in the country earlier this month from Kuwait.

Political analysts say that carrying out relief work — and eventual reconstruction efforts — in Renamo areas could well play a key role in ensuring that Mozambique's move towards peace doesn't collapse or become mired in new fighting as happened in Angola.

Opening up the roads and allowing free movement will help avert fights for scarce food. Thousands of displaced citizens could return to their homes and regain a sense of normality after years of displacement from war and drought.

And if Renamo is involved in rebuilding the ailing country, it, too, will have a stake in avoiding another round of war: