

Herald 25/3/93

By Tommy Sithole
Editor-in-Chief

Dhlakama yearns to swop the bush for the leadership in Maputo

SOON after the famous takeover of the Gorongosa headquarters of the MNR by Zimbabwean troops some four years ago, I accompanied our troops on a helicopter-borne mop-up operation, when the helicopter ran out of fuel and the other flew off for supplies. The intervening two hours of waiting in Renamo heartland was the longest in my life.

Just recently I revisited the Gorongosa area, the nearby Maringue, to be exact, another of the major MNR bases which once was occupied by our forces. There is no gun in sight today and the tense feeling is loosened by the flow of tinned soft drinks and canned beer. Not chilled, but no one is complaining.

In the absence of anything to do as everybody seems afraid of taking pictures in the base, my fedora and glasses hung up in a tree become the serious subject for a European woman photographer.

Now it's late in the afternoon and everybody begins to wonder if Mr Dhlakama is really going to pitch up. He is around, the affable Raul Domingos keeps assuring the restless media people.

Yesterday, Mr Domingos went to Beira to see his family for the first time in 13 years. They stripped him of his watch, his shoes and his socks, and he felt good about it, he says.

Finally, Dhlakama appears in the square of the sparse base, shakes hands with several Renamo officials from various provinces who are here for consultations, exchanges banter with them and takes his seat behind a battery of microphones. Alone. There is only one chair. The message is clear.

A European woman asks him to clip her microphone to his shirt. He tries to do it himself. "Like so?" he asks as he fumbles with the equipment.

"No, no, higher." And higher it goes. He looks pleased with himself as he successfully accomplishes the task. He looks around, a broad smile across his face, and relishes the situation. Here in the thick bush, Dhlakama is presidente. He is authority itself. But it's in the bush. He would rather do this in Maputo or Beira or Quelimane.

And that turns out to be the theme of his address this afternoon. "Who wants to live in the bush like this?" He asks as he insists over and over again that he wants to get out of the bush once and for all and join the political fray in Maputo.

So what's preventing him? Frelimo, he replies effortlessly. "They are violating the Rome peace accord," he charges.

He dwells at length on the

government's alleged refusal to provide him and his staff with the facilities he says were agreed to in the Rome accord which would enable his organisation to do its political work.

With Mr Dhlakama still holed up in his war-time bases in the jungles of the north, the political situation country-wide is still placid. He insists he is now leader of the opposition and, therefore, in recognition of the government in Maputo.

By simply moving to Maputo Mr Dhlakama would single-handedly rejuvenate the political situation in Mozambique. But that he is not yet prepared to do.

Depending on whom one listens to, the Renamo leader has no good reason for not going to Maputo. Frelimo officials say he is afraid to find that he never had the people's support. Mr Dhlakama scoffs at that.

All Frelimo needs to do is implement the Rome accord to the letter and he will fly to Maputo, he says. There is no need for him to continue living in the bush.

"I did not fight for power," he says. "I fought for democracy. Frelimo has agreed to democratic reforms. Now we can fight for votes."

"The government is supposed to provide us with housing, food, offices, telephones and transport, according to the terms of the accord. Now they say they are not supposed to do that. My people in Maputo are being humiliated by Frelimo. They are being forced to beg for food. I will not have that," Mr Dhlakama says.

Apparently, what really irks Renamo is the government's continued control of the media. He feels shut out. In Rome, he insisted on the liberalisation of the media and even got the agreement that heads of the electronic media did not have to be members of Frelimo.

Mr Dhlakama and his party have a bad name to anyone who listens to the radio, watches television or reads the newspapers. "Bandido armada." The term has stuck. In a country that has never had good road networks, media is king. He obviously wants a share of the powerful propaganda machinery to boost his own image in preparation for his grand arrival in Maputo.

Yet he still has to learn the rudiments of public relations. At the Press conference, the Renamo leader did a bad job of trying to explain the massacres of civilians during the war, wanton destruction of civilian infrastructure and the use of child soldiers. He blamed it on Frelimo, claiming that its "indisciplined" army was responsible.

"There were no child sol-



MNR leader Afonso Dhlakama.

diers," he insisted even as the International Red Cross was making arrangements to reunite some of the children with their families elsewhere in Mozambique. "We defeated Tanzanian, Zimbabwean and Mozambican soldiers. Do you mean they were defeated by children?" he asked.

He also does a poor job of trying to explain the devastating American report which confirmed the allegations of atrocities. "It was Frelimo propaganda. Everybody knows that. Communists are masters of propaganda."

However, one cannot but feel the man's desperate appeal to be understood, believed. He wants to "forget the past for the sake of peace."

"Too much blood has been spilt already," he says. "We can't go on like this."

For all the appearance the "president" tries to maintain before the audience and the coolness with which he tries to field questions, Mr Dhlakama all but blows his cool at persistent suggestions that there is a Jonas Savimbi in him trying to get out at the first opportunity.

"The United Nations has to take full responsibility for what has happened in Angola," he says. "They should have confined the two armies to barracks and assembly points first under UN command before the elections."

The Renamo leader seems genuinely concerned that the same might be repeated in Mozambique because the UN is not moving with speed to fulfill its role in the peace process.

"We have been waiting for five months now for the United Nations to send troops here to keep peace. Nothing seems to be happening. Where are the assembly points? When are our

people going to be confined? When is the UN taking over?" he asks.

As he spoke, the advance batch of UN military engineers from Italy were just pitching tents at Chimoio airport. The troops are yet to report. No one knows when troops from Botswana, Zambia, Italy and Bangladesh will report for peace-keeping duties.

Mr Dhlakama appeals to Zimbabwe to understand and trust him. In politics there are no permanent enemies, he says. "We were enemies. Now we are friends," he says.

He insists that Mozambique cannot develop without co-operating with "all" its neighbours.

"What Mozambique needs now is development. We cannot have that without co-operating with our neighbours and foreign donors. We must live in peaceful co-existence and forget our old squabbles," he says.

He is easily upset by allegations that he is still training Zimbabwean dissidents and that a battalion of his commandos, which was trained in Kenya, recently slipped into the country through Malawi.

"Nonsense," he breathed when I asked him later. "Why would I want to antagonise President Mugabe now? Why would I want to bring in troops now? To fight who? For what? This is destructive propaganda."

That night, the camp occupants are treated to an all-night disco. The power for the music equipment is produced by a hand-pedalled generator and unarmed Renamo combatants take turns to bring John Chibadura to life.

Afonso Dhlakama hangs around for several hours talking to people and being feasted upon by mosquitoes like everyone else.

Then he disappears as rice and meat and chicken are served for supper. He sends over 20 litres of Portuguese red wine as a present.

The night is spent in clean, thatched reed huts which are well camouflaged from the air. Clean blankets and bed sheets are supplied but the bed is rock hard.

In the morning, home-baked biscuits, fried eggs and coffee are offered for breakfast. Mr Dhlakama appears and holds Indaba separately with people from the provinces, gives instructions and written directives. He is briefed on the organisation work and the problems they are encountering.

After five hours of meetings he stands up, disappears into the bush in the direction of his dwellings. Minutes later a motorbike engine fires. Later, we are told he left on the chartered Cessna 402 for Lilongwe.