

By
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Mozambique, as it slowly moves towards democracy, has the potential to be a showcase for international nation-building

From soldiers to politicians

MAGUNDE is at the end of the earth. It is a bombed-out monastery and a small tent encampment deep in Renamo territory. To get there I hitched a ride in a Russian helicopter piloted by a young Italian who imagined he was at the wheel of a Ferrari.

As the helicopter came in to land and the giant rotor blade churned up the dry dust of Manica province, there were four lonesome figures waiting. Four United Nations officers — a Sri Lankan, a Moteswana, an Indonesian and a Brazilian — manning what was to become an assembly point for Renamo soldiers.

The Sri Lankan was the most talkative. Major Rabin was a cultured man, driven to distraction by long months of idleness in the hot African bush.

With the pukkah accent of the South Asian public school alumnus, he offered strong opinions on imperialism, on United Nations peace-keeping missions, on cricket. He begged for British newspapers to be sent to his post box across the border in Mutare.

The Italian troops patrolling the Beira corridor have had a telephone booth with a satellite phone installed at their base at Chimolo airport, and the young conscripts spend their leisure time waiting in line to call their parents and girlfriends in Italy. But at the assembly points deep in the bush, no such luxury could be contemplated.

Rabin's only neighbours were a close-knit duo of Sikh engineers in turbans rebuilding the war-shelled road and a detachment of Renamo soldiers scrounging cigarettes and cooldrinks from the UN and waiting for the order to hand in their guns.

Dressed in tattered clothes, the Renamo veterans were barely out of their teens. Not even the commander, Lieutenant-Colonel August Paul, had a uniform. His boots were taken off a dead Frelimo soldier.

A short jeep ride away, in the Chibavaba district, the Renamo civil administration consists of three grass huts, the administrator, Lucas Sibimbe, some mangy dogs and a child in a torn vest. In the shade of a tree, a group of empty chairs, two with their seats missing, are the seat of government for an area the size of Wales.

Most farmers in the district cleared out or were killed during the war. Sibimbe is attempting to recruit those that are trickling back by offering them assistance rather than killing them. He hopes, after next October, to be the MP for Chibavaba district.

Manica province is the territory of the Shona-speaking Mundau people, a Renamo tribal stronghold. After 18 years in which the only way to get anywhere in Mozambique was to belong to the ruling party, the former terrorist organisation now recruits upwardly mobile young people who feel shut out by Frelimo.

Benicio Chimue (22), the Renamo administrator of a vast undefined area in Central Manica province, joined the rebel movement because they kidnapped him, three years ago.

Pressed for what Renamo stood for, he said: "Democracy and freedom of expression and human rights." He had first-hand proof of this, he added. They had not killed him.

Chimue, a small thin man in threadbare clothes had walked 12 hours through 40 degree plus heat to the small town of Catandica, south of Chimolo, to secure humanitarian assistance from the UN High Commission for Refugees for peasants returning to the lands now under his control.

He had carried with him six coloured pencil crayons and an exercise book in which he had carefully transcribed the names of every man and woman who had returned to his area.

The transformation of Renamo from a rag-tag



New hope ... Mozambican refugees in Swaziland head home

PHOTOGRAPH: SYLVIA MORESCHE

army of bandits into a political party is as miraculous as its ability to end a war once feared to be a self-perpetuating spiral of banditry and carnage. According to the UN, there has been hardly a war casualty in a year.

The UN doesn't want to repeat the mistake of Angola, in which both armies were still more or less intact at election time, permitting Jonas Savimbi to springboard back to war after losing the election.

The demobilisation of the estimated 150 000 soldiers on both sides along with 120 000 civilian militia members, is an event in the life of Mozambique of greater significance than the establishment of the Transitional Executive Council in South Africa.

Though South Africans chauvinistically tend to look down upon Mozambique as a poor country cousin, there are many parallels. Both countries are groping not just towards democracy but towards a new definition of nationhood.

Mozambique was the basket case of the region 14 months ago. Today — viewed against the relapse in Angola and South Africa's endemic violence — it has the potential to be a showcase for the international nation-building and the UN's battered reputation for peace-keeping.

Now that demobilisation has begun, UN officials are optimistic that there will be multi-party elections in October next year, that the nipping delays that held up demobilisation for more than a year after the Rome Accords of August 1992, are over.

Much of the credit for the peace goes to Aldo Ajello, a foxy Italian politician, former Socialist member of the European parliament and now UN special representative in the country. It was he who fathered the concept of the carrot — the trust fund to bankroll Renamo's transformation into a political party.

“From the perspective of the peasantry ... the ability to get on with their lives without fear of being murdered is progress enough”

The stick is the threat of the international community pulling out: "The international community is very tired with all the peacekeeping operations, in Africa particularly," says Ajello. "When (UN secretary-general) Boutros-Ghali was here, he told them there is no way you get money or political support or even renewal of the mandate unless you get your act together."

Tens of thousands of peasant farmers are showing, by their voluntary return to the land, that they believe the peace has come at last.

Flying over Manica province last month, I saw fires burning in every direction across the horizon. The farmers were clearing the dense bush that had become overgrown during the war to plant seed before the rainy season.

While food is growing in the countryside again, politics is the growth industry in the cities. A plethora of political parties made up of breakaways, splinter groups and eccentrics has emerged. Anyone with name recognition is standing for public office. Jose Palaco, the leader of one of the smaller parties, sprang to prominence when he won first prize in a national television quiz show, answering questions on the French Revolution.

The third candidate for president, Domingos Arouca, a middle-aged lawyer from Matola, is waging a game battle against Joaquim Chissano and Alfred Dhlakama on the basis that they are responsible for the war and he is the only civilian alternative. Unable to pay the bills for canvassing from home, his telephone was disconnected recently.

From the perspective of the peasantry, who make up the bulk of the Mozambican population, the ability to get on with their lives without fear of being murdered is progress enough. Multi-party democracy in this neck of the woods is a remote concept.

Ninepence Masetiba, wearing a straw hat, an orange polo neck and worn sandals, returned from Zimbabwe last month under the UNHCR returnee programme. At the age of 64, he has known war for 30 years, even since "Portuguese times". He took his mother, wife and five children away from the fighting in 1982 but is now certain that the peace will hold.

Asked about the elections, the first in Mozambican history, he shrugged and looked away, contemplating another incomprehensible and potentially dangerous obstacle to getting on with his life: "I will vote if I am forced to."