

Southern Africa News Features

a SARDC service

29 March 1994

GERMAN RADIO FOR RENAMO TILTS THE BALANCE

by David Martin in Maputo

As the Western demand for political plurality gusts through one African country after another, donors increasingly insist on the "need to level the playing field".

By this they say they mean that the odds are stacked against newly emergent political parties because of the control by the incumbents of the government coffers, the media and transport.

But, in the case of Mozambique, many observers believe that Germany has gone well beyond levelling the playing field and is now deliberately tilting it against the government.

At the heart of this contention is the provision of a radio station exclusively for the former rebel Mozambique National Resistance (MNR or Renamo).

Early last year the MNR leader, Afonso Dhlakama, visited Bonn and met the German Foreign Minister, Klaus Kinkel. Briefing papers which had been prepared for the Minister made no mention of a radio station.

But during the meeting, Dhlakama asked Kinkel to supply the MNR with its own radio station to put it on an equal footing with the Mozambique government. The Minister agreed without consulting his officials.

Kinkel's promise, Bonn diplomats say, had to be honoured although they insist they are embarrassed by the situation they now find themselves in.

"We were hoping that the government of Mozambique would undermine the station on a technical basis or simply refuse to allow it. But, while they told us they strongly disapproved, they did not say No," one Bonn official said.

The Mozambican government could hardly have refused. Had they done so, with opposition parties already insisting the existing national radio is a government mouthpiece, they would certainly have been accused of stifling the democratic process.

Now Kinkel's promise is coming home to haunt his government.

On 3 March, the MNR formally applied to the Mozambican government for a licence to operate its own radio and for the allocation of a frequency. Two annexes were attached to the letter, giving the technical details of the new station which is to be located in the capital, Maputo, and the possible short wave-frequencies to be allocated.

Bonn has already ordered the equipment, valued at one million Deutsche marks (US\$700,000), from a German firm and it is planned to have the station operational by around July to allow the MNR at least three months of broadcasting before October's scheduled elections.

One Bonn official, who said he was opposed to providing the station to the MNR, said his only hope now for sparing his government's embarrassment was that few people would listen to the radio on short wave and he doubted the MNR's ability to run the station.

Whilst the Germans say they will not assist in running the station, the MNR can certainly call upon right-wing supporters from elsewhere.

Although even South Africa has ceased broadcasting anti-government propaganda into Mozambique, a group of US evangelists from a station called Transworld Radio located near Mbabane in Swaziland have been broadcasting four hours daily of the MNR's Voice of Freedom.

But the signal from the 30-year-old (or more) transmitters is so poor it is barely picked up in Maputo only 150 kilometres to the east. And, say Radio South Africa technicians, the station is now off the air because of obsolete equipment which they doubt is recoverable.

The German gift to the MNR can potentially tilt the balance in the battle for votes over the airwaves and this is likely to attract opprobrium from all the disadvantaged opposition parties, and not just the government.

These opposition parties would be even angrier if they knew the condition of Radio Mozambique's broadcasting facilities.

Mozambique's newest transmitters, at Chimoio and Inhambane, are 22 years old, well beyond the normal 15-year life of a transmitter. And others are of pre-World War II vintage and are over 50 years old.

A recent report on the state of Radio Mozambique's equipment put the geographic coverage at three percent of the country by day and 15 percent at night.

The nine provincial stations, when their obsolete equipment is working, which it frequently is not, can expand coverage through medium wave to 15 percent of the country where 30 percent of the population presently lives. But a majority of the 16 million Mozambicans remain beyond the reach of domestic radio.

At a Maputo seminar a few days ago, representatives of political parties showed particular interest in the radio station the United Nations set up in Cambodia for last year's elections there.

That radio operation cost only US\$3.5 million, a tiny amount of the total UN budget for Cambodia. And that exercise, said one of those involved, was "gold-plated". It could have been done much more cheaply.

The political representatives at the Maputo meeting were particularly interested to know why the UN had not mounted a similar operation in Mozambique.

"It is undoubtedly true that the Germans have tilted the playing field in the MNR's favour by giving them the only new radio station which will be operating in this country in the coming months," said a European diplomat in Maputo.

"Now they are trying to say they could not get out of it, but they still can, if they want to," the diplomat said. "It would be more appropriate to use this equipment to strengthen the outreach of the national radio or give the station to the UN to operate."

"The real question now is what can the UN and the donors do to try to re-level the playing field so that all political parties get an equal hearing? If we don't do something there is no way these elections can be free and fair." (SARDC)