

Wary steps to an Angola of the east

OFFICERS of the British army, whose task it is to train troops fighting Renamo rebels in Mozambique, are frequently ferried around the vast country by Soviet pilots in Russian-made helicopters.

There has been little hard evidence to support the much-vaunted theory that British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's visit to the subcontinent next month will herald a joint initiative by the superpowers to bring peace to Southern Africa.

But the image of these unusual travelling companions signifies a real determination by the British government to find ways of ending the 10-year-old insurgency in Mozambique.

At the end of next month, Thatcher meets President Joaquim Chissano at a military base in Zimbabwe's scenic Eastern Highlands, where Mozambican troops are being trained in counter-insurgency warfare by crack British officers.

This week a senior Mozambican government source told the *Weekly Mail* that the meeting could give some substance to Foreign Minister Pik Botha's somewhat vague plan for an Angolan-style settlement of the war in the east.

The Mozambique government insists that the key to peace is South

By EDDIE KOCH

African compliance with the Nkomati Accord, rather than superpower intervention. However, Maputo's envoy acknowledged this week that Thatcher is more likely than either the US or the USSR to ensure that Pretoria honours the non-aggression treaty.

Diplomatic sources claim the Thatcher government played a key role in setting up the summit last year between Chissano and President Botha which led to the revival of the accord.

Robin Renwick, Britain's ambassador to South Africa, came close to confirming this when he told academics after the summit: "We have worked hard to contribute to the process of attempting to normalise relations between South Africa and Mozambique, which culminated in the meeting between President Chissano and President Botha."

Britain has much closer ties with Mozambique than any of the Western or Eastern bloc countries. Its multinationals have massive investments in the farming and mining sectors and Lohmro is by far the biggest private sector participant in the economy.

The government has also pumped £45-million (R200-million) into reha-

bilitating the Limpopo railway link between Maputo and Zimbabwe and its overseas development arm, the Commonwealth Development Corporation, is heavily involved in improving the transport infrastructure in other areas. And most significantly the British have been prepared to back their commitments with hard military support.

Whitehall and Pretoria also have a mutual interest in clinching a peace deal in Mozambique.

Thatcher needs to show her anti-sanctions policy is capable of fostering economic co-operation between South Africa and its neighbours. Pretoria needs to bolster Thatcher's ability to make these claims, especially since the Bush Administration's pragmatic policy on Southern Africa has made the Iron Lady this country's most reliable ally.

Thus it is no coincidence that most of Thatcher's talks with Pik Botha in London last week were taken up with the Mozambican issue. That country will obviously be on top of the agenda when the British premier tours the frontline states, and it is in this part of the sub-region that her "peace initiative" is likely to assume its most concrete form.