

Ideological Shifts, Economic Imperatives:

Southern African States and the Mozambican Peace Process

As Mozambique is a coastal state bordering five land-locked countries, its 'transport corridors' and seaports play a key role in the economy of the whole Southern African region. The strategic significance of Mozambican territory was particularly accentuated during the 1980s due to the economic and ideological struggle between the so-called Front Line States (Angola, Botswana, Mozambique, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe), and the apartheid regime in South Africa.

Starting in the late 1970s, South Africa sought to protect its perceived geopolitical interests through a policy of regional economic destabilisation which included at different times supporting and directing operations of the Mozambique National Resistance (Renamo). In contrast, Botswana, Tanzania and Zambia were generally close friends of the Mozambican government, though it was Zimbabwe which became its principal ally, in return for the staunch assistance given by the Mozambique Liberation Front (Frelimo) during the struggle for Zimbabwean independence. Closely guarding its own

national interests, Zimbabwe became a key player in Mozambique's war and later the regional linchpin of the peace process. Other important players in the region included Kenya under Daniel arap Moi and Malawi under Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda. At different times, these states supported Renamo to one degree or another, and Mozambique's relations with both ranged from 'cool' to openly hostile.

While the political polarisation of Southern African states continued to delay a negotiated solution to Mozambique's war, the region-wide shift in favour of more liberal political forces in the late 1980s and early 1990s increased the chances of a diplomatic settlement. In this context, the transition to majority rule in South Africa was decisive, easing tensions around the control of the regional economy and depriving Renamo of crucial military backing.

Total Confrontation

With the shift to majority rule in Angola and Mozambique in 1975, the buffer zone separating apartheid South Africa from

'Many new governments in Africa have alienated large parts of their own populations. Few have had the bad luck to live next door to a powerful foe ready to exploit their every mis-step'

William Finnegan, 1992, A Complicated War, University of California Press

Summit meeting of African heads of state, Harare 1993. From the right Joaquim Chissano (Mozambique), Quett Masire (Botswana), Robert Mugabe (Zimbabwe), Ali Hassan Mwinyi (Tanzania)

Joel Chiziane/AIM



independent black Africa was severely threatened. With increasing international calls for economic sanctions against the apartheid regime and growing militancy from the exiled African National Congress (ANC), South Africa felt increasingly under siege. It responded with a systematic policy of regional economic destabilisation. On the one hand, this was intended to raise the cost to the Front Line States of supporting the ANC. On the other, it aimed to force these countries into closer economic co-operation with South Africa, thus bolstering its security and legitimacy.

With the collapse in 1980 of the minority regime in Rhodesia, the crisis facing South Africa intensified significantly. Soon after, the apartheid government took control of Rhodesia's Mozambican proxy force, Renamo, and integrated the rebel group into its regional strategy. In supporting Renamo, South Africa hoped to force the Zimbabwean army to intervene more actively in Mozambique, thus overstretching its capacity to deal with political dissidents back home. Pretoria believed this would ultimately force

Zimbabwe to normalise relations with South Africa, conferring increased legitimacy on the apartheid regime. As a revitalised Renamo stepped up its activities in Mozambique in the early 1980s, South African military forces also launched their own armed raids in the country, targeting key economic installations such as the Beira oil pipeline.

In the face of continuing violence, Zimbabwe signed the first of various agreements with the Frelimo government in 1980. This gave Zimbabwe a direct role in guarding Mozambique's 'transport corridors', which were economic lifelines for the land-locked country. With a significant Zimbabwean presence in Mozambique, the Front Line States in the early 1980s probably believed the war with Renamo could be won militarily. In time, however, it became clear that the rebels had sufficient external backing to inflict substantial and sustained damage on Mozambique's railways, ports and external communications. A draining, bloody, protracted conflict was unfolding.

The Origins of Zimbabwean Military Presence in Mozambique

Although the first Zimbabwean troops were officially deployed in the 'Beira Corridor' in 1982, guerrillas of Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwean National Liberation Army (Zanla) had operated out of Mozambique since the early 1970s and there is evidence that some never left. This arrangement stemmed from an alleged agreement between Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) and Mozambique's Frelimo government reached prior to Zimbabwean independence. Through this informal agreement, it is believed that a number of Zanla combatants were permitted to remain in Mozambique after the liberation struggle had ended to help finish off Renamo and to constitute a reserve force should Zimbabwe's 1980 election results turn out unfavourably for ZANU. The ZANU-Frelimo agreement violated aspects of the 1979 Lancaster House settlement that paved the way for Zimbabwe's independence. Its existence was not revealed to the commanders of the new Zimbabwe National Army (ZNA), which included former members of both Zanla and the Rhodesian army.

A False Dawn

While absolute antipathy for apartheid militated strongly against substantive co-operation with South Africa, circumstances at different times forced many of the Front Line States into unpopular, pragmatic compromises. The 1984 Nkomati Non-Aggression Pact, Mozambique's first significant attempt to forge peace with South Africa, was one example of this. In the context of sustained Renamo attacks and growing drought in southern Mozambique, President Samora Machel signed the pact in large part to satisfy political conditions placed on the delivery of US humanitarian aid. As an extra incentive, he had also been promised direct negotiations with Renamo who, faced with a loss of South African backing, were thought ripe both for talks and concessions. All aspects of the Nkomati Pact were opposed by Zimbabwe and the rest of the Front Line States, who feared the South Africans were negotiating in bad

faith and would not halt their support for Renamo under any circumstances.

In the event, Nkomati did fail, partly because elements within Renamo felt they could win the war militarily, but also because outside interests pressured the rebels to halt dialogue, promising continued military and financial support. Although Foreign Minister 'Pik' Botha and others in the South African administration had been in favour of ending the war, later events confirmed that their efforts were undermined by pro-Renamo South African and Portuguese businessmen and by conservative elements within the apartheid government, particularly among the security forces. These hard-line groups would continue to pose a stumbling block to peace in Mozambique until the dying days of apartheid.

In the wake of Nkomati, Renamo adopted more predatory military tactics, systematically targeting rural populations in a bloody bid for supplies and propaganda gains. With little hope of imminent victory, Machel had few options but to consolidate his military position and await conditions more favourable for negotiations. In the meantime, his adherence to the Nkomati pact had allowed food aid into Mozambique and won him the moral high ground for future talks. Nevertheless, within the year, Mozambique would be pushed to the brink of collapse and forced to enlist even more military support from its friendlier neighbours.

Engaging Zimbabwe

By 1985, the gravity of Renamo's threat to Zimbabwean national security was clear. Sabotage of crucial transportation infrastructure was gradually undermining Zimbabwe's economic independence, while the increasing possibility of state collapse in Mozambique threatened its political stability. To compound matters, elements within Renamo declared an intention to expand the war into Zimbabwe, with the seeming complicity of opposition leader Ndabaningi Sithole, then in exile in the United States.

In response to the mounting crisis, President Mugabe met President Machel in June 1985 to discuss increased military assistance to Mozambique. In August, he announced in Parliament that maintaining access to the sea was worth committing up to 30,000 troops and by the end of that month, the number deployed along the Beira corridor exceeded 10,000. Initially, the Zimbabweans took up primarily defensive positions but, as Renamo attacks intensified over the next two years, they launched an 'offensive-defensive' strategy. By 1987, there were 20,000 Zimbabwean soldiers stationed in Mozambique. To all intents and purposes, Zimbabwe had become a central player in the Mozambican war.

Acknowledging the enormous logistical problems faced by the Mozambique Armed Forces (FAM), the Zimbabwe National Army (ZNA) had agreed as early as 1985 to undertake limited offensive operations to destroy Renamo bases. Once over-run, these bases would often be handed over for government forces to defend. The FAM was reluctant, however, to deploy troops to guard isolated bases when this left other, often more populated areas, vulnerable to enemy assault. Invariably, the bases fell back into Renamo hands, confirming Zimbabwean suspicions that the FAM lacked the military capacity to match and defeat the rebels.

The Assault on Casa Banana

In August 1985, the Zimbabweans masterminded a major operation to recapture Casa Banana, Renamo's headquarters in the Gorongosa mountains of central Sofala province. While the operation was successful, with Renamo leader Afonso Dhlakama barely escaping capture, the offensive appears to have been planned, paradoxically, to emphasise that the war could not be won militarily. After seizing Casa Banana, the Zimbabweans flew President Machel into the camp to witness for himself Renamo's high level of military organisation and to consider seriously whether even a combined government/Zimbabwean force could defeat the rebels.

The Zimbabweans also believed at this time that Machel's generals were deliberately misleading the president to hide their weakness on the ground. While, politically, Renamo was very poorly organised, driven largely by the priorities of outside backers, its military superiority in key areas was clear. Contrary to government propaganda, the rebels' intelligence and command structures were often highly effective. At the same time, Dhlakama had relatively firm control over many of his fighters, with whom he was linked through communications systems vastly superior to those of the government.

Diplomatic Appeals

While sustaining its draining military engagements, the Frelimo government also pursued diplomatic channels to counter the growing threat posed by Renamo. In 1986, at an emergency summit meeting of the Front Line States in Lusaka, it reviewed security agreements with Tanzania and Zimbabwe, and also with Malawi.

With its trade routes along the Nacala transport corridor under siege, Malawi undoubtedly suffered due to the Mozambican war. Nevertheless, the foreign policy of President Banda was famously idiosyncratic and his country had long harboured Renamo guerrillas on its soil. Like Malawi's decision to maintain full diplomatic relations with apartheid South Africa, this fact enraged the Front Line States and President Machel, some months before the summit, had threatened to place missiles along the border with his disloyal neighbour. Acrimony notwithstanding, combined pressure from Tanzania, Zimbabwe and Mozambique finally convinced Banda to expel Renamo from his territory. Within the year, rebel incursions from Malawi had reduced dramatically.

In late 1986, both to symbolise its newfound good faith and to protect its economic interests, Malawi deployed a limited number of troops along the railway in the Nacala corridor. At the same time, several

In 1987, an average of 75% of traffic on Mozambique's nine main rail routes was stopped by sabotage

Malawi and Renamo

Malawi's support for Renamo is believed to have been motivated by various factors. On the one hand, President Banda had long subscribed to a peculiar reading of Southern African history which suggested that most of northern Mozambique was rightfully Malawian. It seems that Banda may have hoped that Renamo would orchestrate the break-up of Mozambique, allowing Malawi to reclaim its long-lost territories.

On the other hand, senior figures in Malawi's military and civil administration are known to have profited substantially from their handling of foreign aid to Renamo and international relief to the million or so Mozambican refugees based in Malawi at the height of the conflict. While the country undoubtedly suffered as a result of the Mozambican war, the narrow interests of these officials clearly diluted Malawi's practical commitment to a peaceful settlement.

Tanzanian units also arrived to protect territory recaptured from Renamo. While Tanzania was a strong supporter of the anti-apartheid struggle and the Frelimo government, it also had its own security interests to attend to. Following their expulsion from Malawi, Renamo guerrillas had launched a series of offensives throughout Mozambique's northern provinces, and had regularly breached the Tanzanian border.

Zimbabwe also increased its military presence in Mozambique at this time, though its commitment to a negotiated settlement was by now quite firm. Its strategy was to increase military pressure on Renamo to weaken the rebels relative to the government before forcing them into talks. Efforts to persuade the Mozambicans of the necessity of negotiations were also redoubled through 1986, though it was some time before Frelimo would discuss the possibility publicly.

Clearing the Tracks for Talks

On his return from the Lusaka summit, President Machel was killed in a plane crash over South Africa. His replacement, Joaquim Chissano, was Mozambique's long-serving Foreign Minister who for some time had believed the war unwinnable. While these events opened new possibilities for a diplomatic solution, Chissano did not seek negotiations immediately, believing that conditions were not yet ripe for a settlement at once sustainable and favourable to Frelimo's interests. On the one hand, the Mozambican army was too weak to guarantee the negotiating strength Frelimo required to control the outcome of talks. On the other, sustained efforts were still required to achieve a broad political consensus behind his negotiation strategy.

With the need for consensus clear in his mind, Chissano immediately held discussions with the top brass of the army and asked them their views on the war. The generals agreed unanimously that the problem was money and that if Chissano authorised an increase in the defence budget, they could still defeat Renamo. The president reluctantly agreed to these demands. As it happened, 1987 did see a critical turning point in the Mozambican war when a major offensive by Renamo and the South African Buffalo Brigade was routed by a combined force of Mozambican, Tanzanian and Zimbabwean troops.

Even as the FAM was regaining the military initiative, however, Mozambique's allies in the Soviet bloc were increasingly unable to sustain their support. When the generals demanded further budget increases, Chissano told them he would refuse more money and seek a political solution if victory was not achieved by the deadline they proposed. As stalemate set in between Renamo and the FAM, this strategy was vindicated and military resistance to negotiations diminished. Capitalising on his position of relative strength, Chissano tentatively began to pursue indirect contacts with the rebels,

enlisting the support of Mozambican church leaders (see Sengulane and Gonçalves, p. 26). By this time, Renamo started to suspect that it too could never win the war and was immediately, though cautiously, receptive of the churchmen.

In 1988-89, regional developments such as Namibia's transition to independence, the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola and the inklings of political reform in South Africa also increased the impetus for negotiations. In June 1988, President Chissano met his South African counterpart, P.W. Botha, to revive an agreement between the two countries and Portugal concerning Mozambique's Cahora Bassa Dam and its power supply to South Africa. Discussions were also held on the status of migrant workers and the communication links between the two countries. Chissano hoped, with some confidence, that this strengthening of economic links would motivate South Africa to conclusively terminate its backing for Renamo.

In the new spirit of expectation, Chissano travelled across Mozambique to prepare the people for the prospect of negotiations. In the process, he stopped using the propaganda phrase 'armed bandits', and began referring to Renamo by name. At the 5th Frelimo Congress in July 1989, he shifted his focus onto Frelimo hardliners, persuading them that Mozambique's best interests lay in engaging with Renamo politically. Frelimo resolved to liberalise the political system at this Congress, setting the stage for future multiparty elections. This move gained the party the support of international donors, and also secured its control over the political reform process. Despite its wily manoeuvring to marginalise the rebels prior to negotiations, however, many in Frelimo remained fearful of elections. While it had come to power in 1974 with overwhelming popular support, the party had been seriously discredited by its tarnished development record and its inability to protect the people during the war.

Straining Solidarity

Besides placating his party and his generals, Chissano's strategy to defeat Renamo politically also required a subtle renegotiation of the long-held alliance with Zimbabwe. The Zimbabweans had long been losing confidence in Mozambique's military and political capacities and were anxious to ensure their economic interests were protected whatever the outcome of peace talks. As a consequence, from 1988, they began to tolerate, if not encourage, informal contact between Zimbabwean forces and Renamo, and stepped up intelligence operations to determine levels of rebel support within local populations. Such operations were eased by the ethnic and cultural ties between the Shona and the Ndaou, the dominant ethnic groups in Zanu and Renamo respectively. They were also facilitated by the absence of formal agreements governing Zimbabwe's military presence in Mozambique and arrangements for civil governance in the areas surrounding Zimbabwean bases.

Although Chissano himself had actually endorsed contacts between the Zimbabwean government and Renamo as a means of speeding up talks, he was increasingly wary of his ally hedging its bets on future political developments. Tensions heightened after the discovery that the Zimbabweans were keeping captured Renamo soldiers in their camps who were potentially rich sources of intelligence. Nervous of the independent Zimbabwean agenda developing in Mozambique, Chissano called for a more formal, regulated relationship to shore up the alliance and ensure Zimbabwe's actions remained in concert with his own government's interests. While his demands were understandable, Mozambique remained heavily dependent on Zimbabwe's military presence and President Mugabe continued to exploit the freedom of manoeuvre this brought him. As a consequence, relations between the allies cooled markedly and Mozambican officials remained wary of Zimbabwean motives right up to the 1994 elections.

President Machel (left) with President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania on the eve of a frontline summit, Lusaka, Zambia



Sérgio Santimano/AIM

Jockeying for Position

Despite and perhaps because of this cooling in official diplomatic relations, President Mugabe came to play a central role in bringing about direct negotiations between the government and Renamo. This was made possible to some degree by 'Tiny' Rowland, then chief executive of the UK-based multi-national Lonrho (see Alex Vines' article, p. 66). Between July 1989 and October 1990, Rowland provided transportation as well as funds to assist Mugabe and President Moi of Kenya in mediating talks between representatives of Renamo and the Frelimo government. These meetings took place in different capitals across the region in the run-up to more formal negotiations in Rome and were supported by other regional and international actors including Presidents Banda of Malawi, Kaunda of Zambia and Masire of Botswana.

Because they lacked political skills and negotiating experience, and were weak in their knowledge of constitutional and electoral processes, Renamo had much to lose in the peace process. Wary of but needing external advice and support, the rebels remained cautious in the initial flurry of diplomatic activity. Moreover, while foreign backing and illicit activities such as traf-

ficking in ivory and precious stones had enabled Renamo to sustain its military activities, it now needed new sources of financial support. This fact was not lost on Rowland and the Zimbabweans and, with Chissano's acquiescence, both began to channel significant funds to Renamo to buy its co-operation. Once the rebels were convinced they couldn't win the war, these incentives played a decisive role in their decision to make peace.

As the prospect of direct talks became increasingly likely, the South Africans too began to consider the future of Renamo. By this time, the influence of military hardliners had declined sharply and South Africa was well aware of the rebels' weaknesses. To protect its shifting interests in the transformation of the Southern African political economy, and to facilitate Renamo's integration into the political mainstream, South Africa reformulated its support for the rebels. High-level officials undertook several secret visits to Renamo-held areas in the late 1980s to discuss with the rebels how best to shape and articulate their political demands. 'Pik' Botha's role was of particular significance in these visits, and also in facilitating access between Renamo and the Mozambican government.

A Journey Begins

As informal contacts between Renamo and Frelimo continued in the capitals of Botswana, Kenya, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe, official negotiations began in Rome in July 1990. Financed by the Italian government and hosted by the Sant' Egidio lay community, these talks proceeded at an agonisingly slow pace, with many setbacks. An early disagreement concerned who would serve as official mediators. Kenya placed pressure on Renamo to demand President Moi be given the role, while the government strongly favoured Mugabe. Agreement was eventually reached on a four-member mediation team drawn from Sant' Egidio, the Italian political establishment and the Mozambican Catholic Church.

After official talks began, two key events helped speed their success, reducing external involvement in the conflict and opening the way for an authentically Mozambican settlement. The first of these was the strong stance taken by Nelson Mandela following the ANC leader's release from prison in 1990. In his first international address at Wembley Stadium in London, Mandela demanded from Pretoria a final severance of all military

support for Renamo. With the established risk of alienating the ANC and its supporters in the delicate transition from apartheid, President de Klerk was motivated to confront his remaining hard-line generals and Mandela's demands were soon met.

A second key development occurred in Rome on 1 December, when the government and Renamo agreed the terms of a partial ceasefire which, among other things, confined Zimbabwean troops to the Limpopo and Beira transport corridors. While violations of the ceasefire occurred regularly on both sides, this was another important symbolic event. Mugabe's in-principle agreement to restrain his troops opened the way for greater trust between him and Renamo leader Afonso Dhlakama, and gave him considerable influence over the rebel leader. As the risk of Renamo backing out remained the greatest threat to the peace process throughout the Rome talks, the implementation of the peace agreement and the holding of elections, this relationship proved invaluable. With degrees of support from 'Tiny' Rowland, the South Africans and other regional and international leaders, Mugabe would play an important role at every step in convincing Dhlakama to remain engaged. ■



Ferhat Momade/AIM

President Chissano with President F.W. de Klerk of South Africa, Maputo, July 1992