

LOCAL FEATURE

Face-to-face talks offer last hope for Mozambique

PEACE for war-weary Mozambicans now seems within grasp with Mozambique President Joaquim Chissano and MNR leader Afonso Dhlakama meeting face-to-face for the first time in Rome, Italy, today to iron out a lasting solution to the country's 15-year-old civil conflict.

President Mugabe, who has been instrumental in facilitating the meeting following direct contacts with Cde Chissano and Dhlakama on separate occasions, is to attend the talks as an observer, together with a representative from the Botswana government as well as negotiators and other observers at the Rome peace talks.

The meeting, the result of long and protracted diplomatic efforts by several Western and African leaders, including President Mugabe who is the current chairman of the Frontline States, is expected to signal the beginning of an end to the brutal and devastating civil war in Mozambique, in which more than one million people have been killed or maimed, another 4.5 million displaced internally, with the majority of almost three million having been forced to seek refuge in Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi and South Africa.

The war, which has been characterised by brutal atrocities such as the slashing of lips, ears, noses and breasts of innocent civilian victims by the MNR bandits, occasionally spilled over to neighbouring countries, such as Zimbabwe and Zambia.

As a result of the war, Mozam-

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bique is reported to have suffered economic losses well over US\$20 billion in the past 15 years and had its infrastructure reduced to ruins.

Two-thirds of Mozambicans live in abject poverty, many families have disintegrated and the cohesiveness of rural societies had disappeared, leaving a void for victims of war.

These problems have been compounded by the current drought during which the shipment of massive food aid meant for the starving, particularly the vulnerable rural population, is said to be impeded by the military operations of the rebel movement.

According to the World Food Programme, the Food and Agriculture Organisation and the United States Agency for International Development, organisations which have sent missions to Southern Africa to assess the impact of the current drought, the situation in Mozambique is critical, with more than three million people facing possible death from famine.

An international human suffering index study conducted recently by the Washington-based Population Crisis Committee, listed Mozambique as the country with the highest level of human suffering in the world.

The Rome meeting might, therefore, signal the end of this tragic human suffering whose magnitude and protractedness is incomparable in the recent history of civil strife in Africa.

This situation led to President Chissano recently declaring in Harare that: "I would not like to have a meeting that will be a failure because we want peace quickly."

The current round of peace talks in Rome, which started in May this year, has been deadlocked over a series of military issues, including the composition of a new national army and the future of the intelligence service.

Up until July, there had been 11 rounds of peace talks between the two sides, which were brokered by the Italian government and the Catholic Church.

The talks have been on and off for the last two years because Renamo came up with new stumbling blocks each time some sort of an agreement seemed in sight.

Nonetheless, early this year, President Mugabe met President Chissano in Beira to seek ways of helping the peace process in that country.

President Mugabe turned down a request by Renamo leader Dhlakama for a meeting with him while in London last May because he first wanted to consult his Mozambican counterpart.

After conferring with Cde Chissano, President Mugabe subsequently met Dhlakama in Blantyre, Malawi, in the presence of President Kamuzu Banda.

Following the July 4 Gaborone meeting between Presi-

dent Mugabe, President Masire and Dhlakama, the MNR leader agreed to meet President Chissano, in Rome.

In turn, President Chissano also agreed on July 19 while in Harare, to meet Dhlakama.

Political observers believe that the presence of President Mugabe at the direct talks between Cde Chissano and Dhlakama today in Rome, would add weight to the apparent common desire for peace by both sides.

"If Renamo responds to this (peace) appeal, then I will meet Dhlakama. I shall shake Dhlakama's hand. I shall pick up my pen and write that the war has ended," said President Chissano to thousands of Beira residents at a mass rally recently.

Dhlakama had also expressed similar sentiments, albeit against demands for certain guarantees from the Mozambican government.

After his meeting with Presidents Mugabe and Masire in Gaborone, Dhlakama was quoted as having said that his movement was ready for an immediate ceasefire so long as there were guarantees that he and his followers would not be arrested or harassed by the Mozambican government.

"Between brothers, together we can find a solution because this war is not good for Mozambique and the whole region," Dhlakama said after the Gaborone meeting.

On his part, Cde Chissano is quoted as having said he could go to Rome "because I will be able to give these guarantees with certainty and honesty".