

MOZAMBIQUE News reports & clippings

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Comment and personal view on Renamo and the raid on Santungira:

History matters

Recent skirmishes between Renamo guerrillas and Mozambican government military, leading to the attack Monday on Afonso Dhlakama's headquarters in Santungira, need to be viewed in a broader context of post-war history.

Dhlakama has failed to convert the former guerrilla movement into an effective political party, and 21 years after the peace accord Renamo is no longer a serious political force. Perhaps the biggest problem has been Dhlakama's concern with preventing the rise of anyone who might challenge his leadership. Effective political organisers like Raul Domingos and Daviz Simango were forced out of Renamo. Meanwhile, Dhlakama maintained detailed control over key figures, to the point of watching parliament sessions on TV and phoning the head of the Renamo parliamentary bench to give instructions. Thus there has been no renewal of the Renamo leadership, while the opposition Mozambique Democratic Movement (MDM) is composed of some of the more competent people who have left Renamo.

Frelimo, by contrast, has built an effective party machine similar to European parties, and the middle level leadership has substantial autonomy to work within guidelines set by the top leadership. And there is renewal, which changes at the top of the party.

The first two multi-party parliaments in the late 1990s are instructive. Armando Guebuza as head of the Frelimo bench turned Frelimo in parliament into an opposition to Frelimo in government under President Joaquim Chissano. But Renamo has never used parliament, with its widely watched television and radio coverage, as a platform to put itself forward as an opposition with alternative ideas and policies.

Finally, Dhlakama has proved to be a poor negotiator, holding out for maximum demands and using boycott as his main bargaining tactic. In 2000 he turned down an offer for a role in appointing governors, which would have significantly increased his political standing; he rejected this, demanding more, and in the end received nothing. Similarly, in the writing of election laws he has constantly held out for an opposition majority on the election commissions, and thus missed opportunities to make changes to electoral laws that would have been to Renamo's benefit.

Weak

From a peak of more than 2 million votes in 1999, support to Dhlakama fell to 650,000 a decade later. He retreated first to Nampula and then to Santungira in the bush near Gorongosa, and became almost invisible. Renamo has no mayors and controls no municipalities, and Dhlakama announced that he would boycott the 2013 local elections and 2014 national elections. This will

remove all of Renamo's political power, as well as reducing a key source of revenue and jobs.

Meanwhile aging Renamo guerrilla leaders watched the Frelimo leadership becoming more prosperous, and began to complain that they had gained nothing from being loyal to Dhlakama. To show that Renamo still needed to be taken seriously, guerrillas this year attacked the main north-south road, police posts, and an arms dump. Dhlakama is a good tactician, and several of the attacks were well planned and effective. But he is a poor strategist, because there is no clear vision of what he hopes to accomplish, except an impossible list of maximalist demands.

Neither side is militarily strong. In the 1980s Renamo had the backing of apartheid South Africa and its fighters were young and trained. Now its aging guerrillas can draw on their experience to do individual attacks, but do not have the capacity to wage a war. And the Frelimo government opted for a small and weak military, both to keep costs down but also to prevent military coups. The army suffered some losses in confrontations with Renamo, but was able to surround Santungira and move up heavy weapons. But both sides are avoiding big battles. For example, Monday at Santungira, the government showed again that its tactic is to warn Renamo that it is going to take a base, allowing Renamo to retreat before the army walks into the base with no fighting.

Money

Aldo Ajello, the UN special representative in Mozambique 1993-4 after the peace accord, always stressed that Renamo was more interested in money than power, so they were given big houses in Maputo and allowed to run up large hotel bills. And the current dispute has money at its base. Renamo and its military men see the Frelimo leadership with big cars, expensive houses, and businesses. As the gap between rich and poor increases in a way that could not be imagined at the time of the peace accord in 1992, key Renamo figures want to be on the side of the wealthy.

It would be easy to give Renamo sinecures on state company boards and shares in new mining businesses; a Renamo private security company could be given contracts to guard unimportant state property. Perhaps cars and houses could be made available. As Renamo becomes marginal, its leadership could slide into a comfortable retirement. Unfortunately Frelimo is seen as unwilling to share the growing cake; even within Frelimo, some think Renamo needs to be given money.

In recent talks, the Guebuza administration has taken a very hard and bureaucratic line with Renamo. Dhlakama has sensibly suggested facilitators for the negotiations, which could give the talks more flexibility, and which might lead to some of the financial issues being dealt with even if hard political issues are not. But government steadfastly refuses. Guebuza seems unwilling to give Dhlakama anything which is face saving.

Many of the issues being raised by Renamo are real, including the politicisation of the state apparatus and an electoral system which gives Frelimo advantages. In part because of maximalist negotiating strategy, the failure to make effective use of the media, and Dhlakama's withdrawal from public life, Renamo has failed to make political capital of these issues, or to promote plausible responses.

The future?

So Renamo has retreated to the bush, boycotted elections and withdrawn from political activity, and is reduced to small attacks on police posts and cars in Sofala province. And government must respond, because no government can allow an opposition party to carry out armed actions. Renamo seems to have few options – its electoral boycott means it has no preparation on the ground for a campaign, even if it decided to end the boycott, which means MDM will become the main opposition party.

Could Renamo be convinced to accept a large amount of money and some token concessions, such as extra seats on the electoral commission? Could Frelimo be convinced to make such an offer? Probably not, on either side. Which points to more months of the status quo, of sporadic

military attacks and pointless negotiation. Probably the longer term solution is independent mediators and back channel talks to try to find something that Frelimo would be willing to offer and Renamo willing to accept. Talks between the military on both sides might also lead to a settlement largely bypassing Guebuza and Dhlakama. But it won't happen soon.

Skirmishes are not a return to war. Most civil wars do not end neatly and there are continued military incidents, and it appears that Mozambique is no different, even though there has been a 20 year gap. The small attacks will continue – Renamo attacked its former headquarters town of Maringue, Sofala, Tuesday morning, and may try to establish a new base there. The army continues to run armed convoys on 100 km of the main north-south road, and Renamo shot at one convoy Tuesday, according to @Verdade.

Even with these incidents, Mozambique remains much less violent than South Africa. Thus the on-going confrontation seems unlikely to dampen business interest in Mozambique.

Dhlakama has backed himself into a corner from which there is no obvious exit, and Guebuza is not offering a way out. And both now have too much pride invested. So more of the same seems likely until someone or some group can find a way of negotiating a solution without the big men being involved, but which preserves face for both of them.

Joseph Hanlon

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Mozambique media websites:

Noticias: www.jornalnoticias.co.mz

O Pais: www.opais.co.mz

Macauhub English: www.macauhub.com.mo/en/

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Good daily newsletters:

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