

Peace process shifts eastward?

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Though still at an exploratory stage, prospects for an internationally mediated peace initiative in Mozambique appear even more likely following the recent trip to the region by the American senior deputy assistant secretary of state for African affairs, Charles Freeman.

"Nothing has yet jelled into a plan of action," noted a well informed Western source in Harare, "but I think we are about to see a playback in Mozambique of the US/Soviet role in resolving the Angola/Namibia issue."

Freeman's trip to Mozambique, South Africa, Angola and Zimbabwe in late February/early March followed a suggestion by South African Foreign Minister Pik Botha that the complex peace process in the western half of southern Africa be tried in Mozambique.

"The idea," he told foreign correspondents in early February, "is that if we could have done it in respect of a very difficult area in the west, why can't we do it in the east?"

The US lost little time in making a positive response, and despatching Freeman, who did the leg work that finally

led to the 22 December peace accord between South Africa, Cuba and Angola, to sound out the waters on the opposite side of the region.

Talking to local reporters after discussions with President Mugabe in Harare, Freeman said Mozambique and South Africa had both formally asked the US to intervene. He described his talks with all parties concerned as "very encouraging".

Diplomats in Harare note that there are important differences between Angola and Mozambique. By removing South Africa as a direct presence, but leaving Unita as a force to contend with, probably aided covertly by South Africa, the 22 December peace accord has more or less only succeeded in bringing Angola to the same stage as Mozambique, they point out. Resolving the internal crisis in Mozambique, they add, could be infinitely more tricky. Renamo, they note, is far more ethereal than Unita, with hardly a leadership or ideology to speak of.

On the other hand, the diplomats point out, there are strong reasons in favour of trying to find an internationally mediated solution to the crisis in Mozambique.

Within Mozambique, there is a growing realisation that the devastating war, which has cost an estimated US\$10bn, cannot go on forever. President Chissano's policy stance has been that since South Africa is at the heart of Renamo, there is no point in talking to the rebels per se. But his talks with South Africa's President P. W. Botha last September, and various agreements to increase economic co-operation

between the two neighbours, haven't helped much either. Despite the landmark agreement by South Africa to provide Mozambique with non-lethal military equipment to help protect the Cahora Bassa dam, almost 900 pylons have been destroyed in the last six months, compared to 574 pylons in the preceding period. Renamo has also continued to stage dramatic attacks on the Komatipoort-Maputo railway, and on civilian targets. Mozambique, according to the local news agency AIM, is increasingly convinced that there are deep splits within South Africa between Foreign Affairs and pragmatic business interests on the one hand, and the military on the other. Ex-Mozambican whites living in South Africa, and right-wing groups in the US, are another possible source of sponsorship. This complexity has made it increasingly apparent that simple bilateral talks with South Africa will not necessarily solve the problem. Although Chissano remains understandably cautious, there are also signs that he is beginning to see the need to involve Renamo in peace talks. In what might be regarded as a major turning point - considering his earlier firm position against any contact with Renamo - the Mozambique President told a meeting of the Socialist International in Harare mid-February that his government would talk to Renamo if it renounced violence. An international conference, diplomats say, would provide the necessary "cover" for the Mozambique government to make contact with Renamo without being seen to be shifting too far from its earlier position. Some suggest that the negotiations could even take the form of "proximity talks" with a mediator moving between the two groups, without them sitting in the same room. A Soviet presence would be vital for Mozambique, to provide a true international flavour and respectability to any such talks, the diplomats say.

- Although the imperatives for South Africa are not as strong as they were in the case of Namibia and Angola, where Pretoria's direct involvement had become a huge drain on the national budget, South Africa has good reasons for wanting peace in Mozambique. Sanctions have limited the country's ability to compete in overseas markets, forcing it to look to regional markets instead. In addition, South Africa is desperate to break out of its international isolation, and to appear "reasonable" in world eyes. Not coincidentally, Botha's proposal for a US mediated settlement in Mozambique followed strong evidence presented at a Commonwealth meeting in Harare that South Africa continues to fund Renamo. While even the US now accepts this evidence, the one piece of good news for Mozambique is that there are growing signs that South Africa's Ministers of Finance and Foreign Affairs may finally be gaining the upper hand over the military hardliners in cabinet.
- Of all the Frontline States, Zimbabwe remains most sceptical of South Africa's motives in the region and - at Pretoria's insistence - was deliberately cold-shouldered during the Angola/Namibia initiative. Privately, Zimbabwean officials are critical of the recent apparent warming of relations between Maputo and Pretoria. However, the country is spending huge amounts of money maintaining an estimated 10,000 troops along the Beira Corridor, and is under increasing internal pressure to scale down its role in Mozambique. Mugabe is also likely to go along with whatever Chissano decides. Other leaders of the Frontline States are unlikely to present much problem. "If the signals are right, they will quickly fall into line", says one expert.

- For the US, brokering another peace agreement in Southern Africa is good politics, and would be one more face-saver for the otherwise largely discredited policy of constructive engagement. The US also has some advantages as regards Mozambique. Unlike its position in Angola, it has good relations with the government, and no formal ties with the rebels. However, the Bush government's right wing credentials give it a better chance of reaching Renamo than any other country.
- Although the Soviet Union has not yet formally commented on the initiative, as in Angola, Moscow would undoubtedly be more than happy to see economic prosperity return to Mozambique, which owes the USSR the equivalent of \$2.4bn. The new winds of peace created by better relations between the superpowers across the globe also provide Mozambique with a unique opportunity to break out of its current quagmire.

The major question, of course, is how Renamo and its sponsors will respond. In an editorial, Harare's *Financial Gazette* noted recently that with Chissano's announcement that he will talk to Renamo if it renounces violence, the rebels have a chance to prove whether they have any agenda or grievances beyond their heartless destruction. So far, the rebels have not responded to the US initiative, and according to a prominent businessman in Harare, "It is not clear yet that Renamo really feels sufficiently pressured to talk."