

Mozambican Rebels Join Peace Initiative

By Sharon Behn

NAIROBI, KENYA

IN a surprisingly conciliatory statement issued in Nairobi this week, the Mozambican National Resistance (Renamo) rebels declared they would do everything possible to bring peace to their war-ravaged southeast African nation.

Renamo released its 16-point peace plan following four days of official talks in the Kenyan capital with Mozambican church leaders representing the government — the first such high-level official negotiations since the war began 12 years ago.

Acknowledging that "none of the parties involved in this conflict have anything to win with the continuation of the war," the right-wing guerrilla force emphasized the need for a political solution.

"It is not Renamo's intention to change the existing order in Mozambique through armed force. The armed struggle is just a last recourse. Renamo will do everything it can so the actual negotiation process continues and finally ends in peace," said the statement.

The religious delegation had presented the guerrilla force with a government-designed 12-point program that called for Renamo to renounce violence, recognize the legitimacy of current Mozambican institutions, and integrate into the existing political system.

Renamo, however, led by the little-known Afonso Dhlakama, is unlikely to budge from its longstanding position that it "is a political force" and that "the

people are sovereign and have the inalienable right to elect their leaders."

A Western diplomat in Nairobi briefed by Kenyan officials on the talks said the result was "encouraging." But, the diplomat said, there are two main sticking points between the parties — Renamo's refusal to lay down its arms and its insistence on free, competitive elections.

Willingness of officials in Mozambique's capital, Maputo, and Renamo to talk, albeit indirectly, means the war has reached a brutal stalemate that neither side can afford to prolong.

More than 100,000 civilians have died in the conflict, while another 300,000 have died of starvation and disease. An estimated 350,000 persons have fled into adjoining countries, and about 4 million people have been internally displaced or seriously affected.

Renamo has had difficulties in the past being accepted in any but the most right-wing of political circles. But in the past year, Renamo appears to have become more cohesive politically and therefore more approachable.

"The dropping of outside faction-fighting representatives and delegating more decisionmaking power to those in the bush has effectively pulled the rug from under Washington and Lisbon influences. Mr. Dhlakama is in a better position today than ever to lead the talks," explained one American citizen who has monitored Mozambique since its independence from Portugal in 1975.

South African leader F. W. de Klerk, meanwhile, officially is maintaining that Pretoria has stopped backing the group — although private citizens there and in the United States are believed still to be supporting military training and logistical help for Renamo.

Today, Mozambique is considering an International Monetary Fund program to turn around its devastated economy. Private education and business are no longer forbidden, and military tribunals have been abolished for civilian cases.

Mozambican President Joaquim Chissano, who came to power in 1986, is also under tremendous pressure from his new Western allies — like the US and Britain — and African friends, to find a political solution to bring an end to the war.

And as he and Dhlakama no doubt realize, the closer Maputo moves to the West and abandons the old-guard Marxist platform, the less reason there is for Renamo to exist at all.