

Mozambique turns to U.S. for rapport with S. Africa

By Glenn Frankel

MAPUTO, Mozambique (WP) — After three years of dead ends, frustration and mounting criticism in southern Africa, the Reagan administration is on the verge of a major diplomatic triumph in this most unlikely corner of the region.

Marxist Mozambique, battered by drought, economic hardship and attacks from Pretoria-supported rebels, has turned to the United States to secure its future by brokering a rapprochement between itself and its hostile, giant neighbor, white-ruled South Africa.

In a stunning reversal, Mozambican officials, who three years ago were among the most bitter critics of administration policy in the region, now have emerged as virtually its sole supporters. "I hate to say it, but the policy is working, at least in this case," said a Mozambican diplomat.

Relations have warmed to the point where another diplomat admitted privately that he and other government officials would prefer a Reagan re-election victory in November to avoid a large-scale turnover at the State Department of diplomats who have engineered the policy, and to avoid giving South Africa an excuse to back away from a rapprochement. They strongly believe the administration's policy of "constructive engagement" — including friendlier American relations with Pretoria — has been a major factor in persuading the South Africans to re-examine their attitude toward Mozambique.

Some diplomats here believe the move away from hostility between Maputo and Pretoria is extremely tenuous and that the most the Mozambicans can hope for is perhaps a six-month respite from South African military pressure while it attempts to cope with its serious internal problems.

But the Mozambicans themselves and their new American diplomatic partners see the possibility of a much broader and permanent historical change that could prove as significant for this region as the Camp David accords were for the Middle East.

"It is a phase of history when both leaderships are called upon to cool their minds and reflect on the societies they are responsible for and on the region," said Shafiq Kahn, director of North American and European affairs for the Mozambican Foreign Ministry. He called this moment "a unique opportunity" for both countries.

Mozambique is seeking an end to South African support for the rebel Mozambican national resistance movement, which has wreaked havoc on already drought-devastated rural areas here. It also wants a

return of South African investment to the level that existed 10 years ago when this country was a Portuguese colony.

In return, it is prepared to put some additional restraints to prevent guerrillas of the insurgent African National Congress from using Mozambican territory as a launching pad for attacks on South Africa. But the Mozambicans insist they are not willing to repudiate their moral and political support for the Congress nor to endorse apartheid, the South African system of racial segregation.

Instead, they say, they are offering South Africa an even more valuable prize: the opportunity to change its status as a pariah state in black Africa by establishing ministerial-level contacts with one of the continent's radical states.

"It will be for South Africa a great chance of breaking its world isolation," said Aquino de Braganca, director of the Center for African Studies here and close adviser to President Somora Machel. "This country is prepared to have cooperation provided our sovereignty is guaranteed."

Mozambican officials credit the United States as the main instigator behind the new round of South African-Mozambican talks that began Dec. 20. The rapprochement is the Reagan administration's first opportunity to reduce the level of violence in a region that has seen an upsurge of guerrilla attacks inside South Africa and cross-border raids and military operations by Pretoria over the last three years.

American diplomats also believe that a settlement between Pretoria and Maputo could pave the way for a similar accord between South Africa and Angola, where more than 20,000 Cuban troops help prop up a regime whose territory has been invaded a half dozen times in the last decade by South Africa, and lead eventually to an agreement on independence for South African-controlled Namibia.

There could be no more dramatic indication of the change in American-Mozambican relations than the warm reception given to Chester Crocker, assistant secretary of state for African affairs, during a two-day stop here last week. He was received by an enthusiastic and effusive Machel at his summer home in Bilene, 100 miles north of here. Sources said Machel readily agreed to Crocker's request that he use his influence with Angola, a fellow Marxist state and former Portuguese colony, to aid a possible diplomatic solution to the impasse over Namibian independence.

It was in stark contrast to Crocker's reception during his first visit here three

years ago, when he was denied a meeting with Machel and instead subjected to a stinging lecture on Mozambican sovereignty by Foreign Minister Joaquim Chissano.

One month earlier, the Mozambican had expelled four U.S. diplomats they accused of spying for the CIA. Washington retaliated by cutting off food aid. Even worse was the Mozambican fear that the recent election of President Reagan, who had publicly referred to South Africa as "our natural ally," had encouraged Pretoria to embark on a policy of military aggression in the region. Less than two weeks after Reagan's inauguration, the South Africans launched the first of a series of cross-border attacks, killing at least 12 South African refugees and kidnapping others in a commando raid on a southern suburb of Maputo.

"Being treated as though the U.S. was a source of the region's problems instead of a potential source of solutions was not an enjoyable position," said a senior Western diplomat here.

It was not long, however, before both sides saw they had common interests. Despite substantial Soviet military and economic assistance, Mozambique still faced massive economic problems that officials believed required large infusions of Western capital to overcome. They also needed someone to intercede with Pretoria.

For its part, the United States needed a potential black ally to legitimize its policy and was eager for a diplomatic triumph after several years of intense efforts but few concrete results.

The thaw began in the fall of 1982 when Chissano met with Secretary of State George Shultz at the United Nations. It soon was followed by a long visit here by Crocker's deputy, Frank Wisner, who is given much credit here for the improvement in relations.

Mozambican officials say the Americans finally came to understand Mozambique was an independent, nonaligned state, not a Soviet puppet. The Americans say the Mozambicans became convinced that the United States was not encouraging South African aggression in the region. Both sides admit they misjudged the other.

"We committed some mistakes in our relations with America," said De Braganca. "We really think we can't afford in this region not to have relations with the U.S. it has a role to play."

With U.S. encouragement, Mozambique engaged South Africa in two sets of ministerial talks in the South African border

town of Komatipoort beginning in December 1982. The meetings were said to be candid but led to no agreements. Meanwhile, rebel attacks on Mozambique continued, as did South African military retaliation inside Mozambique following attacks by the African National Congress within South Africa.

Then last October Machel visited Western Europe seeking economic and military support. He received some encouragement but also was repeatedly told by diplomats in Britain, Portugal and West Germany that Mozambique should first try to work out some of its differences with Pretoria. South African Foreign Minister R.F. Botha received a similar message when he toured Europe in November.

The result was a ministerial meeting in Swaziland in December that was decidedly more cordial and produced proposals for further talks. Four committees were established to discuss security, economic, energy and tourism matters. One Mozambican participant here said the sessions so far had been enthusiastic and candid.

Sources here say the South Africans have tacitly admitted they have at least some influence over the Mozambican rebels, though Pretoria publicly continues to deny Maputo's claim that it has armed, trained and financed the insurgents. The sources also say that, so far at least, the South Africans have not insisted that Mozambique renounce or withdraw all support from the African National Congress.

Nonetheless, Congress leaders here are deeply concerned. While publicly expressing support for the Machel government, Congress members privately confess reservations. "We will survive but it may make things a little more difficult," said one member.

Both the Americans and Mozambicans concede the new initiative is extremely fragile. A new spate of attacks by the Congress within South Africa could push Pretoria to retaliate again inside Mozambique. A new rebel drive within Mozambique could likewise compel Machel to turn to the Soviet Union for new arms and support.

Also, it is unclear whether detente on the eastern side of the region will produce progress on the western side. While some analysts here believe it will, others believe South Africa may use peace here as a cover for stepping up military action in Angola and Namibia. And the Mozambicans still reject the U.S. contention that Namibian independence can only be achieved if it is coupled somehow with a commitment for the gradual withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola.

But for now, there is a buoyant atmosphere of cordiality and openness here in this battered capital. It was apparent when Machel warmly welcomed the new U.S. ambassador, Peter de Vos, in October to fill a post that had been left vacant for more than three years as a sign of U.S. disapproval. And it is apparent when Mozambican intellectuals discuss their long-time neighbors and enemies, the South Africans.

"It is better to talk to the devil here than to send the whole region into a bigger devil's hands," he said.

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