

Mozambique's soldiers of misfortune

As the Frelimo government and Renamo rebels prepare for peace talks in Rome tomorrow, Karl Maier reports from Quelimane on the struggle between troops and civilians for scarce food relief

SWEATY YOUNG men tossed sacks of maize into a warehouse, as policemen armed with AK-47 rifles patrolled the dimly lit loading-ramp outside, yelling at bystanders to move on and swinging clubs to whack a few who failed to obey.

As darkness fell, people dressed in rags scaled a fence behind the warehouse with the aim of stealing a sack, or even a handful, of maize. The scene was just as tense 100 yards away at quayside, where workers were unloading the Laura, the first big grain ship in two months to have arrived at the port of Quelimane, capital of Zambezia, Mozambique's most populous province and the worst hit by the country's 16-year-old war.

The Laura was bringing food relief for civilians displaced by the war, but its arrival attracted hundreds of people, including hungry soldiers, desperate to get their hands on the precious maize. Four nights later, the police fired into the air to disperse the crowds.

For the past two months, delays in food deliveries financed by a £70m international relief effort to Mozambique have sparked severe food shortages in Zambezia, even in such cities as Quelimane and in other provinces, such as Manica, where severe drought has ruined 90 per cent of the maize crop. As a result, discipline in President Joaquim Chissano's Frelimo government army has been breaking down.

Although there had been incidents of army theft before, an upsurge in Zambezia started in February, when troops escorting a convoy of relief goods unloaded it before reaching their destination: war refugees in the village of Mulevava. A month later, troops shot dead six civilians as a relief ship arrived in the town of Moima on the border with Nampula province.

One international relief agency temporarily suspended an airlift to the town of Murrua after soldiers and militia repeatedly stole food destined for war victims. "It has become an impossible situation," said one government official. "These troops do not get rations for three months, and then when the food finally arrives we tell them not to touch one grain."

Ironically, problems in the army ranks come at a time when diplomatic sources are optimistic that a nationwide ceasefire could be signed at a new round of peace talks between the Frelimo government and the rebels of the Mozambique National Resistance (Renamo) which begins in Rome tomorrow. Italian mediators have been holding a series of meetings with government and rebel representatives in an effort to set the stage for a negotiated end to the war.

The most important outstanding issues to be resolved centre on integration of the two warring armies, a date for general elections and the total withdrawal of the estimated 7,000 Zimbabwean troops guarding two strategic transport routes through Mozambique which link landlocked southern Africa to the Indian Ocean.

The key to the success of any ceasefire, however, is the demobilisation and integration of the poorly fed government and rebel armies, by anyone's measure an awesome task. Renamo's leader, Afonso Dhlakama, is chary of laying down his

arms, the movement's sole telling weapon against the government, given its stunted political profile and Frelimo's adoption of vital planks of its programme. Neither is the rebels' prior record on adhering to agreements very heartening. A ceasefire along the two strategic transport routes, signed in Rome on 1 December, held for 45 days until Renamo renewed its attacks in mid-February.

There is trouble in the government

army barracks, too. The Ministry of Finance, with Swiss government help, has been working on a plan to provide jobs for former army officers and sergeants, but suspicion among the troops runs high. Hundreds of veterans of the war against Portuguese colonial rule are still living in poverty 16 years after independence, and many observers blame the worsening erosion of army discipline on the expected military changes a peace accord will bring.