

Mozambique rebels slaughter fleeing civilians

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An estimated 100,000 Mozambican civilians have been killed by antigovernment rebels "in a systematic fashion" over the past two years, an informed source at the United States State Department says.

Officials involved in preparation of a special study on the plight of Mozambique's refugees say the wanton killing is reminiscent of what the Khmer Rouge did in Cambodia. That horror was captured in the film "The Killing Fields," but the suffering of Mozambique's people is only now coming to light.

"We should have seen what was going on from the general reports we had," says a well-placed US diplomat, "but we didn't see the intensity of the killing."

The State Department report, completed Wednesday, is the result of a three-month investigation by a US specialist who has done similar surveys of 19 other refugee situations. He traveled to 42 locations in and around Mozambique and held long interviews with almost 200 newly arrived Mozambican refugees, selected by him, with the assistance of his own interpreter. He had similar interviews with about 50 independent relief officials.

The civil strife in Mozambique has been under way for more than 10 years, but has intensified dramatically in recent years. The Mozambique National Resistance Movement, or Renamo, is battling the Marxist Frelimo government (Mozambique Liberation Front), which assumed power from the Portuguese in 1975.

Renamo was originally the client of white Rhodesia's intelligence service. It later came under South African tutelage. Elements of South Africa's military continue to provide some equipment and monetary support to Renamo, US officials say.

Renamo has proved an extremely effective fighting force by employing brutal methods. Meanwhile, the Marxist government has begun to adopt capitalist economic methods and sought closer ties with the US and other Western countries.

The human costs of the fighting are staggering. There are 872,000 refugees from Mozambique in surrounding countries; most of the new ones arrive naked or in rags and emaciated. An additional 1.6 million Mozambicans have fled to government-controlled areas within their own country.

Mozambique's economy has shrunk by more than one-third since 1980, and its export earnings have dropped to 35 percent of their 1981 levels. Agricultural production has been ravaged, and rudi-

mentary social services once in place have been eliminated in many areas.

The US Coordinator for Refugees commissioned the special study because the number of refugees flowing out of Mozambique had jumped roughly 300 percent in the last year and humanitarian needs were skyrocketing.

The US investigator found "remarkable consistency" in the accounts of refugees and others he interviewed about the situation inside Mozambique. First, he found "an extraordinarily high" level of violence against unarmed and often passive civilians. The 178 he interviewed presented firsthand accounts of more than 600 civilians killed by Renamo, including 50 children.

"I think it could be quite conservatively estimated that 100,000 people have been executed by shooting, shot in indiscriminate attacks, beaten to death, burned to death, asphyxiated to death, drowned . . . , and starved to death . . . in the last 12 to 24 months," the investigator says in the report.

In one case, the investigator recounts, Renamo fighters entered a village, and brought the head man and his family before the gathered villagers. They then hit the man's head with an ax and burned him and his entire family in their hut. This kind of systematic brutality was reported by refugees from a wide variety of regions in Mozambique.

The only evident pattern of relationship between Renamo and the civilian population is "extraction of labor and food," the investigator says. If there is any reciprocity, he says, it's that Renamo spares the lives of the civilians it needs to work for it. He found no evidence of Renamo's trying to spread a political program or win converts by other than force.

About 3 percent of the complaints by refugees focused on Mozambican government troops. These reports were from isolated regions and appeared to be diminishing over time, the investigator says. He found no evidence that the violence was attributable to "roaming bandits" as some have said. Indeed, in most cases the refugees had a very clear sense of who carried out an attack and would frankly say if they did not know.

The report identifies three types of areas where Renamo is active. In "tax areas," individual farmers produce crops, and Renamo troops regularly collect taxes. Rape and selective murders of suspected government collaborators are common, but there is no effort to gain the allegiance of the local population.

In "control areas," which the report estimates at a little over 10 percent of Mozambique, local and kidnapped people are forced laborers for Renamo. They work long hours without pay and are beaten if they slow down. Many are forced to be porters for Renamo military columns. Many of the refugees interviewed saw porters beaten to death or shot if they collapsed from exhaustion. People attempting to escape from these areas are brought before the others and executed, often along with their families.

The US investigator estimates that tens or hundreds of thousands of civilians are being held in this way.

The final type of region he found is "destruction areas," where Renamo tries to destroy any village of substantial size, as well as attack government targets. Renamo forces often surround a village in the early morning and start firing indiscriminately into it, mowing down civilians as they flee their homes. This type of attack is reported from villages with militia and those without any self-defense.

The State Department source said he had no explanation for Renamo's actions and noted that neither did the refugees he interviewed.