

Mozambique resistance assaults religious centers

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AS MOZAMBIQUE'S MARXIST government moves to heal conflicts with churches, South Africa-backed Mozambique National Resistance (MNR) is violently attacking religious centers, say church officials and diplomats here.

The government announced June 24 it will return churches, seminaries and other religious properties seized after the country won independence from Portugal in 1975. Most belonged to the Catholic church, the state religion under Portuguese rule, but Protestants and Muslims are also involved.

The government nationalized schools and hospitals soon after independence in 1975, in a move accepted by the churches. Under government rule, health and education services rapidly expanded in the 1970s, though most gains were since lost to a systematic MNR campaign of attacks on human service institutions.

But religious facilities were also seized and shut illegally in many places. Mozambican officials say local officials and independent militants acted spontaneously in a popular reaction against the church's pre-independence support for colonialism. Many church people charge it was a centrally organized drive against religion.

Whatever the original motives, the government acknowledged about five years ago that church seizures were illegal and started returning some properties on a piecemeal basis. But the June statement, made by the mayor of Maputo in a meeting with almost 100 church representatives, was the first to agree that all churches must be returned. It was welcomed by church leaders. Many saw it as an effort by the government to heal the last serious outstanding disagreement with religious leaders before the pope's visit to this country in September.

"There's an effort on both sides to establish good relations," said Bishop Paulo Mandlate of Tete, president of the Mozambican bishops' conference. Mandlate noted that the bishops met with President Joaquim Chissano in the last six months for "frank and cordial" dialogue on issues ranging from church property to famine relief to the prospects for peace in this war-torn nation.

There remain some conflicts about particular properties. For example, the government agreed in principle that the former major seminary in Maputo, now a university dormitory housing 250 students, must be returned. Officials said they cannot do so until new housing is built for students, but the church wants it immediately.

While the state seeks better church links, the

MNR increasingly attacks religious centers. On May 17, the South Africa-supported group raided a Methodist mission at Cambine, in Inhambane province, destroying the pastor's house, a Bible school and a health center. U.S. Ambassador Melissa Wells told NCR that Cambine was just one in a series of recent MNR attacks on churches.

U.S. officials emphasize that the MNR's anti-church violence is part of a massive terror campaign. In April, U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Roy Stacy said the MNR wages "a systematic and brutal war of terror against innocent Mozambican civilians through forced labor, starvation, physical abuse and wanton killing." He said the group has perpetrated "one of the most brutal holocausts against ordinary human beings since World War II."

These strong words are unique. No other self-proclaimed "anticommunist" rebel movement has attracted such U.S. condemnation. ■

Missioner's car attacked, two die

Maputo, Mozambique

TWO PEOPLE died in a June 28 Mozambique National Resistance (MNR) attack on a Catholic missionary's car in Mozambique's northern Cabo Delgado province, according to a report by the Mozambique Information Agency (AIM). Sister Maria Marcan, a Spanish nurse, was wounded by the attackers, who ordered her and Father Carlos Pagani out of the car they were using to transfer two patients to a hospital in the provincial capital of Pemba.

The attackers shot the patients and looted the car. Ignoring pleas from the missionaries, they then set the car ablaze with the two passengers still in it. Pagani denounced the killers as "inhuman and people without scruples."