



PHOTOS BY MARK PETERS FOR NEWSWEEK
Southern Africa's blood-curdling answer to the Khmer Rouge: Renamo guerrillas pose in the bush with their AK-47 assault rifles

Heart of Darkness

A visit to the base camp of Mozambique's rebels

BY SPENCER REISS

The only thing moving on the parched savannah of central Mozambique was our twin-engine aircraft, skimming the tall grass between scattered clumps of trees to avoid being picked up by government radar. As the green shoulders of Gorongosa Mountain came into focus, we climbed to 1,000 feet over a canopy of forest, spotted the abandoned roadway and plunged to a heart-stopping landing. Clouded in dust, two dozen ragged young men stepped from the surrounding bush, slinging battered AK-47s as casually as schoolbags. A smiling older man in designer glasses, a black beret and smart camouflage fatigues with three gold stars stepped forward to greet us. He was Afonso Dhlakama, leader of the shadowy Mozambique National Resistance, known better by its Portuguese acronym Renamo and best known as southern Africa's blood-curdling answer to the Khmer Rouge.

A visit to "liberated Mozambique"—the brutal civil war is now in its 12th year—is a walk into one of the world's true hearts of darkness. From Gorongosa and scores of other bases hidden deep in the countryside, Renamo's guerrilla army has spread ruin to every corner of the country and won worldwide notoriety for atavistic horror: massacres, ears and noses lopped off as punishment, mass kidnappings and forced labor. That has cost Dhlakama and his reb-

els every shred of official international support—even that of South Africa, which has long been Renamo's chief outside backer. The savagery has also benefited the very people that Dhlakama wants to overthrow: Mozambique's government, run by a Marxist party called Frelimo. The government now gets as much as \$1 billion a year in foreign assistance, including East bloc and Western military aid and an estimated 25,000 Zimbabwean and Tanzanian combat troops. But at his Gorongosa base camp last week, amid scores of neatly thatched huts, Dhlakama dismissed the reports of



Leading the fight for 'freedom': Dhlakama

Renamo's violence as "nothing but propaganda"—and insisted that his 15,000 fighters were winning their war to "bring freedom to Mozambique."

Our trip was obviously designed to try to counter a highly critical U.S. State Department report last April. It also took place during one of the biggest government drives against rebel strongholds, which has driven Renamo out of half a dozen of the biggest towns that it previously held. Spearheading the offensive were Soviet-supplied helicopter gunships and Zimbabwean paratroopers. And yet not a single reconnaissance plane found Dhlakama's bush headquarters, less than 40 miles from a major government base.

Prized plastic chairs: As long as Dhlakama and his coat-and-tie civilian "cabinet" were on hand, we were obviously not going to be witnessing any atrocities. The camp itself, we were told, is one of half a dozen that Renamo uses in the Gorongosa area. He moves periodically to avoid detection or attack. From cooking pots to a prized set of nesting plastic chairs, virtually everything except the neatly crafted huts could be carried away in seconds. One item that Dhlakama never leaves behind is a high-frequency field radio—part of a sophisticated network supplied by South Africa in the early 1980s—that links him to his commanders. Scores of camp followers—women, children and unarmed "civilians"—bustled along the maze of paths, carrying food or balancing tin containers filled with water on their heads. But we never were out of sight of boys cradling weapons, who—when asked what they are fighting for—answered, "Freedom."

The grievances that drive the rebels are real enough, as even Frelimo officials concede: collectivization of family farms, at-

tempts to oust tribal leaders and suppression of churches. But Renamo officials, stung by charges that they lack popular support, counter with wild claims. They say they control 85 percent of the country outside Mozambique's half dozen cities. Dhlakama, 35, the son of a leading tribal chief and a one-time Frelimo logistics officer, denied another uncomfortable but thoroughly documented fact: Renamo's origins in the late 1970s as a "pseudo-terrorist" group underwritten by Rhodesian intelligence officers to combat left-wing black nationalism. Offering no hard evidence, he blamed reported massacres on government troops masquerading as rebels. "No guerrilla," he blandly insisted, "would ever attack the people."

But Dhlakama poses one unimpeachably good question: "If Renamo does not have popular support, how do we survive with so much against us?" Part of the answer is the government Army's sheer ineptitude. Renamo's hit-and-run attacks have also been undeniably effective, paralyzing road traffic, capturing weapons, picking off isolated towns and garrisons. Renamo insists all its field units be virtual-

ly self-sustaining, making it possible for them to survive without trucks or air transport. And by bringing in foreign troops, Dhlakama says, "Our enemy is only asking more Mozambicans to join us and hit back."

What he did not say is that Renamo's own strange assortment of foreign friends is showing signs of melting away. South Africa's once substantial covert aid, includ-



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Eluding government troops and helicopter gunships: Rebels on patrol

ing air drops of supplies, training and other logistical support, has virtually dried up. Renamo's Washington representatives are virtually at war with their counterparts in Lisbon—Mozambican exiles who left the country when Frelimo took power. And State Department officials have reportedly warned Renamo representatives that Dhlakama could be deported as an undesirable alien if he comes to the United States to try to drum up support.

However savage its field operations may be, Renamo is essentially a conservative movement, seeking a return to traditional ways. As Dhlakama complained last week, "Frelimo has started using all our lines—democracy, freedom of speech, freedom of worship—

but only because we're pushing them." There have in fact been sporadic efforts to bring the two sides together. But by now so much blood has been spilled that a reconciliation is unlikely anytime soon. "We will fight until we win," a young recruit vowed on the dusty training ground at Gorongosa last week. For Mozambique, that may well be a guarantee of continuing disaster.

The Lone Prisoner of Gorongosa

Nick De La Casa, British-born television journalist, has a zest for adventure. A veteran of the last days of the Rhodesian war, he later moved to South Africa and covered the bloody riots in the black township of Crossroads in 1985 and 1986. In between, he made an arduous trek across Tibet, traveled with rebels in the hills of Burma and forayed into Afghanistan with the mujahedin. Last year he loaded a blue backpack with cameras and set out on foot from Malawi into Mozambique, hoping to do a definitive film on Renamo. Just two hours after crossing the border, he was arrested by a guerrilla patrol and marched to Renamo's camp at Gorongosa, where he has been held ever since on charges that he was "spying for Zimbabwean

and for British intelligence."

De La Casa, 28, called that allegation "ridiculous nonsense" last week in a small clearing about a mile from the Gorongosa camp, which he said has moved seven times in the past year—once in the midst of an attack by Zimbabwean paratroopers. Trim, fit and cheerful, he lives in a small hut. The only book he has to read is the Bible, but he is free to move around the immediate area—though an armed guard is never far away. Except for a bout of malaria last October and periodic shortages of food, he had no complaints about his treatment. "They even managed to come up with a cup of tea for the Englishman at Christmas," he chats regularly with a senior Renamo commander who is trying to improve his

English. De La Casa's only real gripe is that Renamo officials have refused to let him film anything since his capture.



Tea at Christmas: De La Casa

He finds his captors professionally impressive. "I've seen a lot more ragtag armies," he said last week. "They're organized and disciplined; they're not a bunch of people skulking under the bushes." Renamo officials say that both the International Red Cross and British diplomats have refused repeated requests to try to negotiate a prisoner swap with Frelimo to gain his release. Dhlakama—who has declined appeals from De La Casa to meet with him face to face—politely rebuffed suggestions that he be allowed on compassionate grounds—as a fellow journalist—to accompany us out of Mozambique. Still, Dhlakama admitted the logic of releasing him, if only for the favorable publicity. And he gave us a message for De La Casa's family in England: "Tell them that it won't be long now."

SPENCER REISS at Gorongosa