

Drought stops war as people starve

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STARVATION may finally bring peace to Mozambique.

The worst drought on record in southern Africa threatens at least a third of Mozambique's 15 million people with death from hunger as rivers vanish and the land is seared.

Diplomats say the level of fighting in the civil war has dropped sharply.

"People are too hungry to fight. They are just interested in surviving," one Western diplomat said.

President Joaquim Chissano, of the ruling Mozambique Liberation Front (Frelimo), and Afonso Dhlakama of the rebel Mozambican National Resistance (Renamo), met earlier this week.

The war is estimated to have cost at least a million lives.

Diplomats say Chissano has been pressured by neighbouring states and the West to seek an end to the fighting.

About one million Mozambicans have fled to Malawi, while hundreds of thousands have sought shelter in neighbouring countries.

Millions more are internal refugees inside Mozambique, swelling urban centres that lack basic amenities.

Frelimo was founded by Mozambican exiles in Tanzania in 1962 to seek independence from Portuguese rule. Armed struggle started two years later, culminating in independence in 1975.

The rebel Renamo movement was formed by Rhodesia's secret service chief Ken Flower in 1974 to fight Frelimo and nationalist guerrillas.

Flower handed control of Renamo to South Africa as Rhodesia became independent Zimbabwe in 1980.

South Africa has disavowed official connections with Renamo, which diplomats say now gains its main support from private right-wing elements in South Africa, Europe and America.

Peace talks under the auspices of the Roman Catholic Church have been held in a desultory fashion in Rome for the past two years. But only last month did Chissano agree to meet Dhlakama.

Frelimo has moved away from its Soviet bloc dependence and has recently ditched ~~Marxism-Leninism~~, opted for a parliamentary democracy and passed legislation adopting basic individual freedoms and a market economy. In return, it receives heavy Western subsidies.

If and when peace finally comes, the main problems will be economic — how to rebuild the shattered country which was left destitute when the Portuguese departed 17 years ago.

Despite the rhetoric in Maputo and the demands of Renamo, politics is likely to be of small concern to the great mass of the population for years to come. — Sapa-Reuters.