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Renamo boycotts dialogue with government

The Mozambican government on 31 August said it was “surprised” at the decision by the country’s largest opposition party, Renamo, to boycott sessions of the dialogue with the government which has been under way since April 2013.

On 23 August Renamo leader Afonso Dhlakama stated that he was breaking off the dialogue. Speaking at a rally in the central city of Quelimane, Dhlakama justified his decision on the grounds that “the government does not want Renamo to form part of the governance of the country”.

Four days later, in the district of Namacurra, Dhlakama categorically stated “There’s nothing! Forget it!” He also flatly rejected the invitation from President Filipe Nyusi for a face-to-face meeting between the two leaders in Maputo.

The head of the government delegation, Agriculture Minister Jose Pacheco, told reporters, “we remain hopeful that our compatriots who are members of Renamo may become aligned with the highest interests of Mozambique, for the progress of Mozambique and for the welfare of Mozambicans”.

The government, he added, remains committed to national unity, to the consolidation of Mozambican independence, and to the spirit and culture of peaceful coexistence.

Speaking to reporters, Renamo spokesperson Antonio Muchanga stated that the event which precipitated the boycott was what he described as the government’s enticement of Renamo officers to join the armed forces (FADM) and the police.

He was referring to the recruitment of two former Renamo officers in late July - Abilio Mucuepa was recruited into the police with the rank of assistant superintendent, and Manuel Lavimo was granted the rank of major in the FADM.

For Muchanga, this was enticement or even bribery.

Journalist assassinated in Maputo

Mozambican journalist Paulo Machava, the editor of the daily electronic newsheet “Diario de Noticias”, was shot dead by unknown assailants on the morning of 28 August in central Maputo, on the corner of Vladimir Lenin and Agostinho Neto Avenues.

According to eye-witnesses the assassination took place at 06.25, when Machava was taking his habitual morning exercise. The killers used an AK-47 assault rifle. Two shots hit him in the head and two in the back. The killers made their getaway in a Toyota Runx vehicle.

A private security guard at a nearby shop told AIM the assassins looked young and acted very quickly. “They’re professionals”, he remarked.

“I heard four shots”, he said. “I ran there and saw some youths entering the vehicle. When I got there I saw a man (Paulo Machava) lying on the ground, covered in blood”.

Machava’s brother, Januario told reporters he believed that the killers had stalked their victim and had come to know his daily routines.

Machava founded and edited the electronic daily “Diario de Noticias”, which he was still running at the time of his death. He also worked as an advisor in the area of events at the Maputo beachside hotel “Kaya Kwanga”.

Illiteracy rate fell eight per cent in decade

The illiteracy rate in Mozambique fell by eight percentage points in the first decade of this century. Education Minister Jorge Ferrao declared in Maputo on 1 September at the launch of International Literacy Week.

In 2000, 56 per cent of the adult population was illiterate, and this figure dropped to 48 per cent by 2010. There are no more recent figures, but Ferrao expected an update when the National Statistics Institute announces the results of the Household Survey currently under way.

The Minister attributed the decline in illiteracy to the efforts of the government and its partners in the Literacy and Adult Education programme. The government’s strategies in this area have allowed the development of a new adult education curriculum which includes literacy classes, not only in Portuguese, but also in Mozambican languages.

Despite the improvement in the literacy figures, Ferrao said that illiteracy remains a serious concern. The statistics show, he added, that there is a much higher rate of illiteracy among women than among men, and that a higher proportion of adults in the countryside than in the towns are unable to read and write.

The statistics also showed a regional gap. “As we move from the south to the north, the illiteracy rates tend to increase”, said Ferrao. The worst figures were found in the northernmost provinces of Niassa and Cabo Delgado.

In the context of information and communication technologies, he added, the government must be more creative in offering attractive platforms that encourage learning among adults and youths, and reduce the absenteeism and drop-out rates in literacy courses.

The government’s target, announced in 2010, was to bring the illiteracy rate down to 30 per cent by this year, 2015.

Mia Couto calls for building of a plural and diverse nation

Mozambique is not a private farm to be divided between rival political parties, warned the country's best known writer, the novelist and poet Mia Couto, on 2 September.

Speaking in Maputo at a ceremony where he was awarded an honorary doctorate in literature by the Polytechnic University, Couto said "We want to learn to be a country that does not exclude, a plural and diverse country. We want to help build a nation that fearlessly accepts its differences. This new attitude may be the cure for a kind of autism we have been suffering from".

He called for an end to the climate of tension in the country. "We have lived for months under the permanent threat of a return to war", he said. "Those who make these threats should know that what they are threatening is not just a government. What they are threatening is an entire people, an entire nation".

In a reference to the country's largest opposition party, Renamo, Couto urged "those who own the guns not to use us as cannon fodder. The proverb says that 'when elephants fight, it's the grass that suffers'. But we are not grass. We deserve full respect, we deserve to live without fear".

"Let those who want to wage politics do so", he added. "But don't point a gun against the future of our children".

Couto warned against the Mozambican tendency of being "selectively deaf. We listen to those who are close to us, those who obey us, those whom we like hearing. We listen to those from our own party, above all those who do not criticise us. Everything else does not exist, everything else is a lie, everything else is slander. Everything else is said by 'the others'" (this has been understood to be a veiled criticism of former President Armando Guebuza).

But the "others" were not some foreign intrusion, Couto stressed. They too were Mozambicans. "The truth is that nobody can annul the existence of these "others". Nobody can know whether they are right, if we do not let them speak freely", he warned.

He praised President Filipe Nyusi, who attended the ceremony, for understanding this, and trying to reconcile the entire nation. "He reminds us that those who say 'no!' come from the same family as those who say 'yes!' And this family has just one house. There is no other place, no other destination except this one, which is called Mozambique".

He called for an end to the gross flattery that has disfigured politics, and was pleased that President Nyusi seems to be leading the way on this, though he feared there was already "a train of flatterers" growing up around the President.

But President Nyusi had given signs that things are changing – immediately after taking office in January "You began to receive people who didn't just applaud, people who asked questions and raised criticisms. Your ministers are doing the same, they are listening to those who think differently".

He thanked President Nyusi "for giving us back our statute of dwellers in the same house. For a long time we were led to build borders that separated us into small nations within the great Mozambican nation. For a long time there were those who suggested there were categories of Mozambicans, some more authentic than others".

Couto lamented "the erosion of moral values" in Mozambique, and suggested that writers could help "rehabilitate the moral fabric of society".

He recalled that a civil servant had recently asked him for a bribe – then recognised him and backtracked. The civil servant said apologetically "You know, Mr Mia, I would like to be an honest person, but I lack sponsorship".

"It's not exactly sponsorship that keeps us from honesty", remarked Couto. "What is missing is to create a narrative which shows that honesty is worthwhile". Instead "there were those who confused the fight against absolute poverty with the fight for absolute greed. They suggested to us that self-esteem could be solved by ostentatious luxury".

There was still a narrative in Mozambican society which hoped to prove "that lying is worthwhile, that theft is worthwhile, that everything other than being honest and working is worthwhile". There were people who talked about businesses and projects, but never about work.

"But deep down we all know that rapid and effortless enrichment can only be achieved one way – by stealing, by corrupting and being corrupted. Nowhere in the world is there any other recipe", Couto said.

"We have to swim against this tide", he urged. "We have to show that honesty is worthwhile. We have to create stories in which the winner is not the most powerful. Stories in which the chosen one is not the most arrogant, but the most tolerant, the one who listens to others. Stories in which the hero is not the bootlicker. Maybe such stories are the sponsorship that our young civil servant lacked".

Working group set up to protect albinos

The Mozambican government on 1 September set up a multi-sector working group to propose measures to protect the country's albino citizens who have recently come under attack from criminal gangs.

Speaking to reporters after the weekly meeting of the Council of Ministers (Cabinet), the government spokesperson, Deputy Health Minister Mouzinho Saide, said the working group will be led by the Ministry of Justice.

"Recently there has been an increase in our country of cases of kidnapping, assault, disappearances and murder of people suffering from albinism", said Saide. "So measures must be drawn up to protect the people who are victims of these acts".

In recent months eight cases of attacks against albinos have been reported, mostly in the northern province of Nampula. In two of these cases albinos were murdered.

Albinism is a genetic disorder caused by the absence from the body of the enzyme tyrosinase, which is involved in the production of melanin, the substance responsible for skin pigments. Without melanin, the skin loses its natural protection against the sun. Albinos are thus vulnerable to skin cancer, and other skin or eye illnesses.

Today, however, albinos are also under threat from superstitious claims that there is something magical about albino body parts. In countries such as Tanzania and Burundi, albinos have been abducted and murdered to harvest their body parts for use in black magic rituals. This repugnant practice appears to have crossed the border from Tanzania into northern Mozambique.

Meanwhile, the associations which represent albinos have been calling for the sale at reasonable prices of sunscreen in public pharmacies to protect their skins against the ultra-violet radiation of the sun. However, the Ministry of Health has admitted that it has no date for when this protection will become available in the public sector.

This is a condensed version of the AIM daily news service – for details contact pfauvet@live.com

Academic and journalist on trial over Facebook post

Prominent economist Carlos Nuno Castel-Branco on 31 August told a Maputo court that a Facebook post he wrote in November 2012 was intended as part of a political debate on the problems the country faced, and not an attack on the honour and dignity of the then president, Armando Guebuza.

Castel-Branco is on trial before the KaMpfumo district court for supposedly libelling Guebuza in his Facebook post. Since libelling senior political figures is classified as a crime against state security, it is not Guebuza himself who brought the case, but the Public Prosecutor's Office.

Fernando Mbanze, editor of the news-sheet "Mediafax", is in the dock alongside Castel-Branco. He republished the post, and stands accused of the crime of "abuse of press freedom".

Guebuza has made no comment on the case, and there is no indication that the prosecutors even questioned Guebuza.

The prosecution claims that various of the statements made by Castel-Branco in his post were untrue, including his opening line "Mr. President, you are out of control".

It also did not like the claim that Guebuza had surrounded himself with "boot-lickers", or that he had repeatedly insulted "those who have ideas about national problems, rather than creating opportunities to benefit from their experience and knowledge".

The prosecution claims that Castel-Branco had compared Guebuza to fascist dictators. In fact, the post warned, not that Guebuza was a fascist, but that his governance might pave the way for fascism.

The politico-military crisis of 2013, Castel-Branco wrote "makes us remember the preludes to fascism. In similar situations, Hitler, Mussolini, Salazar, Franco and Pinochet were installed in power, and were defended by big capital as long as they defended the interests of big capital".

"I did not compare the former president to fascists", Castel-Branco told the court. "But the processes in Mozambique are similar to the processes leading up to fascist dictatorships".

As for saying that there were bootlickers around Guebuza, he pointed out that many others had made similar claims – including senior figures in the ruling Frelimo Party, such as former head of Frelimo's ideology department, Jorge Rebelo.

Castel-Branco was once close to Guebuza. In 1977, when he was 17 years old, he joined the revolutionary armed forces (FPLM), and was placed in the FPLM political commissariat, which was headed by Guebuza. Three years later, it was Guebuza who ensured that Castel-Branco went to university.

At the time, they shared a common ideology – both defined themselves as socialists and as Marxist-Leninists. Asked what had changed since then, Castel-Branco, citing former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis, replied "I didn't change – the boat changed its direction".

As for the publication of his Facebook post in the Mozambican media, he said that he had neither authorised it nor denied permission to republish. "I am not going to exercise censorship against the Mozambican press", he said.

Mbanze told the court that the post had been discussed in the "Mediafax" newsroom, and the journalists agreed that it was part of an important debate of ideas, and was therefore worth publishing. No-one in "Mediafax" had construed it as libellous or insulting.

"Had we concluded it was libellous, we wouldn't have published it", said Mbanze.

It is doubtful that the case should have come to trial at all. For last year the Mozambican parliament, the Assembly of the Republic, passed a law amnestying security offences "of

any nature" committed between March 2012 and August 2014. It could easily be argued that this covers a Facebook post of November 2013.

The prosecution has not explained how it can override words as categorical as "of any nature". But Castel-Branco and Mbanze deliberately did not base their defence on the amnesty law. Instead, they argued that the post was a legitimate part of a national debate.

Castel-Branco's lawyer, Joao Carlos Trindade (who is a retired Supreme Court judge), said his client was not invoking the amnesty law, "because he prefers to be acquitted, since no crime was committed. Accepting an amnesty would be to accept that he committed a crime".

Trindade regarded this trial as a litmus test. "What is at stake is whether we live in a democracy or in a dictatorship where people are gagged and cannot express their views".

"As a court, we have to tell the world what sort of country we are living in", he said. "In no democratic country is someone condemned for criticising the way the President is ruling".

Presidents should be prepared for scrutiny by the public, he added. "They have duties towards citizens, and citizens have to be vigilant to ensure that they are not defrauded".

Trindade quoted sociologist Elisio Macamo, a well-known supporter of Guebuza, who in December 2013 had declared his shock at the decision to prosecute Castel-Branco and Mbanze. "I am astounded by this", he had written. "What kind of country do some people want to build? As a fan of Guebuza, I can't believe he is behind this".

Macamo did not agree with all Castel-Branco had said. "The content of this text is debatable", he wrote. "But since it is debatable, it ought to be debated".

The defence produced several witnesses, including a former deputy chairperson of the Mozambican parliament, and later head of the government's Legal Reform Technical Unit (UTREL), Abdul Carimo, and former deputy agriculture minister Joao Carrilho. It cannot plausibly be claimed that these men are opposed to Frelimo or the government – yet they, and every other witness, saw nothing libellous or insulting in the Castel-Branco post.

"I don't see any intention to offend the dignity and honour of Armando Guebuza", said Carimo. "The article is a cry from the heart. It has a lot of adjectives, but there's no attempt to offend".

The prosecution, on the other hand, did not present a single witness. It brought forward absolutely nobody who claimed to have been scandalised by the article.

Presiding judge Joao Guilherme announced that the panel of three judges court will give their verdict on 16 September. The delay of more than a fortnight was due to pressure of other work, he said.

New pharmaceutical warehouse for Nampula

The South African company Resolve Capacity has been awarded a tender by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to design and build a regional pharmaceutical warehouse in Nampula.

The 18-month project has a budget of US\$7.6 million, with the warehouse covering an area of 3,212 square metres. It will hold more than 6,000 pallets.

Resolve Capacity will manage the project, but construction work is to be carried out by a Mozambican company.

USAID is funding and managing the construction phase. After completion, the Nampula regional pharmaceutical warehouse will be handed over to Mozambique's Ministry of Health.

President Nyusi pledges to improve business environment

President Filipe Nyusi on 31 August reaffirmed his government's commitment to improving the business environment

Speaking at the opening of the 51st edition of the Maputo Trade Fair (FACIM) he stressed that the government has made already improved dialogue with private business.

He was optimistic that this would breathe new life into the existing partnership, and galvanise the role of the private sector as a worthy champion of economic development.

President Nyusi repeated his warning that the country should rely on the foreign investment megaprojects, and urged the private sector to invest more in traditional economic activities, such as agriculture, agro-industry, livestock and fisheries.

He wanted to see the private sector add value to the raw materials produced in the country, intervening in the value chain and creating new jobs

President Nyusi also encouraged the creation of more cooperatives and economic associations.

There are 2,950 companies and institutions exhibiting at FACIM. Of these 680 are foreign.

President Nyusi said the presence of so many companies, from the most varied sectors of activity, showed the strategic importance of the trade fair as a window display of what Mozambique produces, consumes and exports.

"FACIM is more than a mere exhibition", said the President. "It is the thermometer that measures the pulse of our economy, reflecting the selfless efforts of Mozambicans to win their economic independence".

Mass campaign against trachoma planned

The Health Ministry will launch in September a mass campaign against trachoma in the four provinces where the prevalence of the disease five per cent or more.

Deputy national director of public health, Quinhas Fernandes, told journalists the campaign will be launched on 14 September.

Trachoma is one of the illnesses referred to as "neglected tropical diseases", and the Ministry intends to launch annual campaigns for the massive treatment of these diseases.

Trachoma is endemic in 36 of Mozambique's 151 districts, and the campaign should reach over 2.4 million people.

Anti-trachoma campaigns are not new. Fernandes said they began in 2013, in ten districts in the northern province of Niassa. In 2014, the campaign was extended to all 16 districts in Niassa plus five in neighbouring Cabo Delgado.

Niassa does not figure this year's campaign as the prevalence of trachoma in Niassa has fallen to below five per cent, the threshold for a disease to be considered endemic.

The first phase of the campaign will run for five days (14-18 September), aimed at over 622,000 people in the Cabo Delgado districts of Chiure, Ancuabe, Nangade, Palma and Mueda, and at 193,000 people in Macossa, Guro and Tambara districts in the central province of Manica.

The second phase will run from 19-23 October, in Nampula and Zambezia. The expectation is to treat over a million people in the Nampula districts of Angoche, Erati, Liupo, Mozambique Island, Memba, Mogincual, Mossuril and Nacala-a-Velha. In Zambezia, the target is to treat 815,000 people in Chinde, Luabo, Inhassunge, Maganja da Costa, Mocubela and Pebane districts.

"The objective is to ensure that the target group receives adequate medicine", said Fernandes. "Infants up to six months old will receive a tetracycline ointment, those aged between seven months and five years, will receive an azithromycin syrup, while people over five years old will receive the same medication in pills".

About 3,700 health professionals will be involved in the campaign, which will cost the equivalent of US\$325,000, financed by the Health Ministry and by the US-based international NGO, Research Triangle Institute (RTI).

Trachoma is an infectious disease of the eyes caused by the bacterium *Chlamydia Trachomatis*. It causes a roughening of the inner surface of the eyelid, which can lead to considerable pain, breakdown of the cornea and possible blindness.

About 80 million people across the globe are estimated to suffer from trachoma. The disease is the main cause of poor vision in 2.2 million people, of whom 1.2 million are completely blind. 230 million people are at risk in 53 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

The disease can be treated with antibiotics such as tetracycline and azithromycin, but it also crucial to improve the supply of clean water in the areas at risk.

Special Economic Zones identified

The Mozambican government has identified 24 "development hubs" where Special Economic Zones for agro-business can be established, according to Agriculture Minister Jose Pacheco.

The Special Zones will promote investment in key sectors to raise agricultural production. The establishment of these zones is being coordinated with the Ministry of Economy and Finance as investors could be offered tax exemptions.

The 24 Special Zones are located along Mozambique's six agricultural development corridors. These are the Maputo and Limpopo corridors in the south, the Beira and Zambezi Valley corridors in the centre, and the Nacala and Pemba-Lichinga corridors in the north of the country.

Opportunities in the six corridors have been identified for the value chain of products such as potatoes, wheat, beans, maize, soya, rice, poultry, cattle, and forestry products.

Several Special Economic Zones already exist – but these are mostly for industries and tourism. The best known is the Beluluane Industrial Park on the outskirts of Maputo, where the MOZAL aluminium smelter is located.

In addition to the Special Zones, Pacheco said his Ministry is negotiating with the Tax Authority (AT) to exempt from customs duties and value added tax (VAT) the import of spare parts for agricultural equipment. This includes tractor tyres and irrigation tubing, which will fall substantially in price, if the AT accepts the Ministry's proposal.

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