A peace built around a table

How a Roman lay community, a rented UN machine and cash for the losers ended Mozambique's war, 1990-1994

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Abstract

Mozambique's civil war killed about one million people and displaced five million before it ended not on a battlefield but at the Rome headquarters of a Catholic lay community. Between 1990 and 1992 the Community of Sant'Egidio, alongside the Italian government, mediated roughly a dozen rounds of talks between the government and Renamo rebels, producing a seven-protocol peace agreement. A United Nations operation then did the unglamorous work: monitoring the ceasefire, demobilising 76,000 soldiers, paying them to go home, funding the rebels' conversion into a political party, and supervising elections that the losing side nearly abandoned mid-vote. Growth then averaged nearly eight percent for two decades. Yet poverty fell slowly, the settlement partly unravelled into renewed fighting in 2013, and an unrelated insurgency opened in 2017. This case study examines how the mediation and implementation actually worked, what was measured, what later failed, and what Sri Lanka might conditionally borrow.

Why this case for Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's own attempts at a negotiated peace relied on a state facilitator and a ceasefire that eventually collapsed; the war ended militarily in 2009, and debates about reconciliation, demobilisation and the political treatment of former enemies remain unfinished. Mozambique faced the same design questions - who can talk to both sides, what happens to the losing army, who pays for the peace - and answered them with an unusual cast: a volunteer community in Rome, a UN mission staffed partly by Sri Lankan troops, and donor money explicitly budgeted for the rebels. The answers held for twenty years, then partially failed. Both halves of that story are instructive.

The starting point: a war neither side could win

Mozambique left Portuguese rule in 1975 and slid almost immediately into a war between the Marxist Frelimo government and Renamo, a movement created by Rhodesian intelligence in the 1970s and later sustained by apartheid South Africa. By the late 1980s the conflict had killed about one million people, displaced five million - nearly a third of the population - and wrecked one of the poorest economies on earth. Landmines, destroyed clinics and raids on supply routes made much of the countryside ungovernable.

Three shifts made negotiation possible. The Cold War's end removed both sides' external sponsors: the Soviet bloc stopped underwriting Frelimo, and a reforming South Africa cut Renamo loose. The 1984 Nkomati non-aggression accord with South Africa had already shown Maputo that security could not be won purely by arms. And inside the country, churches - the one institution with channels to both camps - had been quietly probing for talks since the mid-1980s. Scholars of the talks describe the conflict by 1990 as "ripe": military options were exhausted, war funding scarce, and popular support for fighting gone.

The mediator that emerged was not a state. The Community of Sant'Egidio, a Rome-based Catholic lay community of volunteers, had built ties with Mozambique since 1976 through the Archbishop of Beira, Jaime Goncalves. It had shipped relief supplies to the government and, in 1982, negotiated the release of clergy held by Renamo. It was one of the very few actors in the world simultaneously trusted - or at least tolerated - by both sides.

The decisions: who mediates, and how the table was set

The first decision was the government's: to talk to Renamo at all, and to accept a non-state facilitator. In June 1990 the two sides met informally at a World Cup football match; on 10 July 1990, at Sant'Egidio's Rome headquarters, they issued their first joint communique, describing themselves as "compatriots and members of the great Mozambican family" and pledging to "set aside what divides them." The mediation team that formed around the table was a strange quartet: Andrea Riccardi, the community's founder and a history professor; Matteo Zuppi, a Roman priest; Mario Raffaelli, an Italian politician representing his government; and Archbishop Goncalves. Zimbabwe and Kenya served as additional channels for the government and rebels respectively.

The second decision was method. The community's house style - shared meals, no deadlines, no public posturing - turned logistics into leverage. Sant'Egidio's own retrospective records one working lunch where two whole grilled fish were served so that each delegation leader, by Mozambican custom entitled to a fish head, received one: a small signal that the two leaders sat at the table as equals. The talks ran for 27 months. Accounts differ on the count: Cameron Hume's study of the negotiations describes twelve rounds between July 1990 and October 1992, while a Georgetown case study counts eleven mediated meetings. Both agree on the sequence: a partial ceasefire in December 1990, a framework protocol in October 1991 that fixed the agenda, electoral-law principles in March 1992, and humanitarian guarantees that July.

The third decision was to widen the guarantees. The community deliberately pulled in the Italian government as chair, the UN and four Western governments as observers, and regional presidents as witnesses - converting a private channel into an internationally owned process. On 4 October 1992, Chissano and Renamo's Afonso Dhlakama signed the General Peace Agreement in Rome: seven protocols covering basic principles, party recognition, the electoral law, military questions, guarantees, the ceasefire, and a donors' conference.

The machinery: implementation was designed, not assumed

The agreement's drafters assumed the signature would fail without scaffolding. Protocol I had already created a Supervisory and Monitoring Commission to run the transition; once the UN Security Council established the UN Operation in Mozambique (ONUMOZ) in December 1992, that commission was chaired by the UN and seated the government, Renamo, Italy, France, Germany, Portugal, the UK, the US and the OAU - a standing body where every dispute had a venue. The mission's special representative, Aldo Ajello, commanded about 6,500 troops and military observers drawn from about forty countries, including Sri Lanka.

Protocol IV designed the armies' endgame with unusual precision: a new national defence force of exactly 30,000 - 24,000 army, 4,000 air force, 2,000 navy - staffed 50-50 from government and Renamo forces, with every soldier outside it demobilised in stages. In practice, most soldiers wanted out more than they wanted in: facing assembly-area riots, the parties let troops choose, and the great majority chose demobilisation with a donor-financed package of six months' government salary plus an 18-month subsidy. By late August 1994, 70,086 soldiers (52,242 government, 17,844 Renamo) had been demobilised; the new army was quietly scaled to about half its paper strength.

The most unconventional instrument was money. The UN created trust funds to bankroll the peace's politics: 17 registered parties received $150,000 each, and a dedicated fund financed Renamo's transformation from an army into a party - offices, salaries, vehicles, campaign costs. Italy alone contributed over $11 million. The logic, later dubbed "money for peace," was blunt: a defeated rebel movement with no budget would return to the bush; a funded one had a future in parliament. ONUMOZ ultimately cost $492.6 million and lost 26 personnel.

Measured outcomes I: demobilisation, resettlement and a mid-vote crisis

The numbers the UN recorded at the time are the case's spine. Demobilisation eventually covered more than 76,000 soldiers from both sides, with about 10,000 integrated into the new national army and roughly 155,000 weapons recovered. Some 3.7 million internally displaced people were supported; the UN refugee agency repatriated 1.3 million refugees in what was then its largest African operation, and by mid-1994 about three-quarters of the displaced had been resettled. Voter registration reached 6.36 million, about 81 percent of those eligible.

The process nearly failed on polling day. On 27-28 October 1994, with voting under way, Dhlakama declared the election rigged and ordered a boycott. The rescue was improvised within 48 hours: Sant'Egidio members flew to him, Zimbabwe's President Mugabe - once Renamo's sworn enemy - talked him down in a 30-minute phone call, and South Africa's Thabo Mbeki called and flew in. Dhlakama rejoined, voting was extended, and the UN guaranteed investigation of his fraud claims. The episode is the case's most portable lesson: the guarantors' work peaks after the signature, not before it.

The results held. Chissano won 53 percent to Dhlakama's 33; Frelimo took 129 of 250 parliamentary seats against Renamo's 112. The UN declared the vote free and fair; Dhlakama protested, then accepted. Parliament and president were inaugurated on 8-9 December 1994, and ONUMOZ's mandate ended at midnight on 9 December - a mission that left on schedule. ONUMOZ is still cited in UN literature as one of peacekeeping's clear successes.

Measured outcomes II: two decades of growth, then the cracks

The post-war economic record is real but narrower than its legend. Real GDP growth averaged 7.9 percent over 1993-2015, among the fastest in sub-Saharan Africa, and GDP per capita grew about 4.8 percent a year between 1993 and 2013. Poverty fell - from 68 percent in 1997 to 52 percent by 2009 on the long series, or 60.3 to 48.4 percent between 2002/03 and 2014/15 on the later one - but each percentage point of growth reduced poverty at barely half the regional rate. Growth leaned on donor flows and capital-intensive megaprojects - an aluminium smelter, coal and gas - with few jobs attached; inequality widened, the Gini rising from 0.47 to 0.56 between 2008 and 2014. In 2016 a hidden-debt scandal triggered a currency and governance crisis, and growth fell to about 3 percent.

The political settlement also frayed. In 2013, Renamo - citing grievances that included ex-combatants' exclusion from pensions available to government veterans, its incomplete transformation into a party, and Frelimo's monopoly of state power - returned to low-intensity armed conflict in its old central heartlands. Fighting ran until a unilateral Renamo truce in December 2016. A second peace architecture followed: talks backed by a Swiss- and American-chaired international Contact Group produced a decentralisation constitutional amendment and, on 6 August 2019, the Maputo Accord for Peace and National Reconciliation between President Nyusi and Renamo's new leader Ossufo Momade, with a second demobilisation programme. Matteo Zuppi, the priest from the Rome talks, witnessed the signing.

From 2017 a separate, Islamic State-linked insurgency in Cabo Delgado province opened a third conflict, one the Maputo settlement was never designed for: a UN rapporteur counted 6,632 deaths, including 2,772 civilians, and about 1.5 million displaced by mid-2026. Peace in Mozambique, in other words, proved durable between its original belligerents - and incomplete as a national condition.

Transfer limits: what Mozambique does not prove

First, ripeness is not a strategy. The Rome process began when both sponsors had withdrawn and both armies were spent; the mediation did not create those conditions, it exploited them. A mediator transplanted into an unripe conflict inherits the failure, not the method. Second, the cast is hard to copy. Sant'Egidio's access rested on fifteen years of patient relationships and its lack of coercive power - strengths a state or an NGO assembled for the occasion cannot quickly replicate. The UN's role also depended on a rare post-Cold War Security Council consensus and a $492.6 million budget; today's divided council funds and authorises few such missions.

Third, the measured successes are specific, not general. Demobilisation worked partly because most soldiers preferred severance pay to service, and because 1.3 million refugees had functioning communities to return to. The election succeeded on a franchise where the incumbent party genuinely won; a settlement that requires the stronger party to lose would test the machinery differently. Fourth, the sequel warns against complacency: the 2013 relapse grew out of grievances - veterans' pensions, political exclusion - that the 1992 architecture left unresolved, and neither accord addressed the regional inequality that later fed Cabo Delgado. Mozambique shows that a peace process can end a war decisively while leaving the next war's causes untouched.

Finally, the economic record is not evidence that peace alone delivers shared prosperity. Two decades of near-eight-percent growth halved the poverty rate only slowly and raised inequality; the growth model's weaknesses were a policy choice, not a peace dividend. Any borrowing of the Mozambique story should separate what the peace process fixed from what post-war governments failed to fix.

Conditional lessons for Sri Lanka

These are design observations, not prescriptions, and they assume nothing about current Sri Lankan parties.

1. Mediation capacity can be built before it is needed. Sant'Egidio's leverage came from relationships started in 1976 - in peacetime, with no mandate. Sri Lanka's equivalents - religious bodies, professional associations, retired officials with cross-community trust - are a form of national insurance that costs little to maintain.

2. Put the guarantees in writing and in the budget. Mozambique funded the loser's conversion into a political party as a line item, not an afterthought; any Sri Lankan settlement design should price the political survival of the weaker signatory.

3. Design for the day-after crisis. Dhlakama's mid-vote boycott was reversed because guarantors were present, empowered and on call; an implementation commission with named foreign members, meeting continuously, outperforms a ceremony.

4. Demobilisation is a welfare programme with a security label: six months' salary plus eighteen months' subsidy, chosen voluntarily, moved 70,000 soldiers out of arms faster than force could have.

5. Reconcile the ledgers early. Mozambique's relapse traced to unequal veterans' pensions - a resolvable administrative gap left to fester for two decades.

Sri Lanka has already stood on the guarantor's side of such a process: its troops served in ONUMOZ. The country's question is not whether it understands this machinery, but whether it will ever need to run it at home - and whether, if it does, the guarantees will be designed as carefully as the signatures.

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