

A leader with integrity

Niren Tolsi speaks to ex-Mozambican President Joaquim Chissano

Attribute it to his yoga, but there is a sublime zen that surrounds former Mozambican president Joaquim Chissano. The only fracture in his aura appears as we stand in his hotel elevator at the end of our interview: "Well, if the West is concerned about China's human rights record [as a reason to deter increasing trade with Africa], then perhaps African countries should reconsider trading with America because of their war in Iraq and their torture of prisoners in Guantanamo," he quips.

Otherwise, the recipient of the inaugural Mo Ibrahim Prize for Achievement in African Leadership is a measured character. He is the consummate diplomat.

On China's increasing economic interest in Africa, Chissano is encouraging, but cautious: "China is a country like any other country, they will offer something that will give them maximum benefit ... but at the end of the day they have been open to a win-win situation. They know they are working with economically weaker partners, so they know how to facilitate things. But it is up to African countries to be careful and protect the interest of Africans," he says.

According to the Mo Ibrahim Prize committee's citation, Chissano won the award as much for leading Mozambique out of 16 years of violent conflict to a peaceful multiparty democracy as for his

roles in attempting to resolve the conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Uganda. There was also the small matter of his not seeking a constitutionally allowed third term as president of Mozambique — he has since been described in various quarters as the antithesis of the typical "big man" African ruler.

Chissano stresses that in the case of Africa in general, and President Thabo Mbeki specifically, a maximum three-term presidency may not be such a bad idea. He feels South Africa is different from Western democracies, which operate on a "fixed model" and allow for a maximum of two terms. Rather, he finds the country similar to its African counterparts, which are building institutions, political systems and systems of development — all of which require time.

"So that is why I say, even for South Africa, if the Constitution had foreseen a third term for the presidency, it may have been a good idea, perhaps for a period of 25 years with that system, and if things were stable, then perhaps the Constitution could be looked at again," he says.

Chissano insists that succession comes with problems. These include having to solve a predecessor's mistakes.

"It is not the same thing, when you are president you are in charge," he says, in response to the notion that Mbeki's vice-presidency was, ostensibly, his first term.

While Chissano declined his own third term, he points out that prior to his election in 1992 he had served a six-year stint as president after being elected as successor to the assassinated Samora

Machel in 1986. Mozambique was a single-party state at the time.

Born in the rural village of Malhice in Mozambique's southern province of Gaza in

1939, Chissano moved to Portugal in 1960 to study medicine. A year later, escaping the Portuguese secret police, he moved to France, where he became acting president of the National Union of Mozambican Students (Unemo). He travelled to Dar es Salaam in Tanzania to meet various Mozambican liberation movement leaders. The Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (Frelimo) was founded on June 25 of that year. Moving to Dar es Salaam a year later, he was appointed private secretary to Frelimo president Eduardo Mondlane and received military training in the former USSR.

At the second Frelimo congress, in the liberated zone of Niassa in northern Mozambique in 1968, he was elected a member of its central committee and played a role in the 1974 Lusaka Accord between Frelimo and the Portuguese government on Mozambique's independence.

At the age of 35 he steered Mozambique's transitional government as prime minister before independence was declared on June 25 1975. He was appointed minister of foreign affairs in independent Mozambique.

With the world in the throes of the Cold War, and Mozambique's Marxist government under threat from counter-revolutionary groups such as Renamo and insurgent forces funded by the South African government, Chissano admits to knowing well the damaging effects of conflict. He points out that the "dramatically violent conflict in Mozambique during the period 1976 to 1992" inflicted casualties, including 1-million lives lost (half of those children), 1.7-million refugees fleeing the country and 4-million internally displaced people.

These experiences have equipped him to deal with conflict resolution — in which he has been actively involved since stepping down as president — in other parts of Africa.

"Finding the root cause of conflict through dialogue" is the most important step towards resolving conflict, he says. He has been working since last year in Uganda as special envoy to the secretary general of the United Nations to resolve one of Africa's longest conflicts.

In northern Uganda, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) has been wag-



The University of Kwazulu-Natal's arts and culture department and the Luthuli Museum invited former Mozambican President Joaquim Chissano to deliver the Chief Albert Luthuli memorial lecture at the university last weekend. Photographs: Rajesh Jantilal

ing a war that can be traced to the mid-1980s, after Yoweri Museveni overthrew the regime of Tito Okello, an ethnic Acholi from the north. Led by Joseph Kony, the LRA — supported by Sudan — has been plundering the land and the population.

The government has responded with failed military attacks and its scorched-earth policy is an attempt to strangle supplies to the LRA. Ordinary people have suffered at the hands of the antagonists. In 2005 the International Criminal Court issued a warrant of arrest for Kony, his deputy, Vincent Otti, and other LRA leaders.

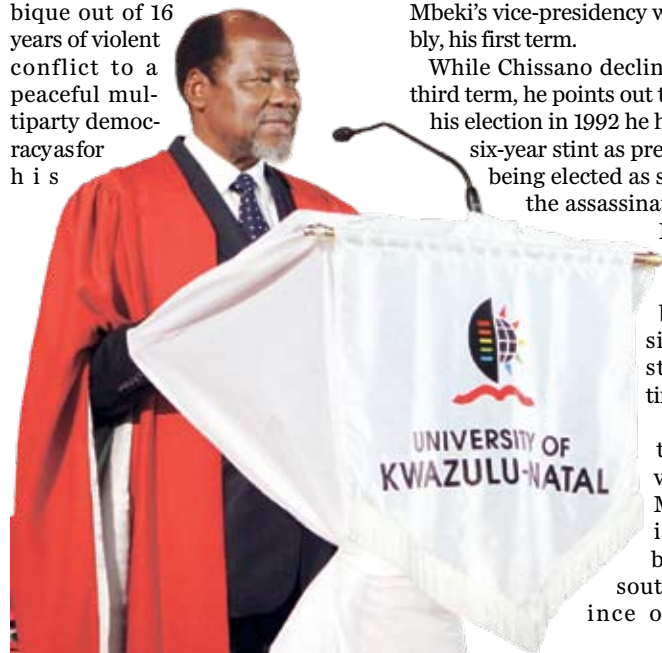
Negotiations began last year in the southern Sudan town of Juba. Chissano is "optimistic" that a resolution can be achieved. He says the issuing of a deadline for talks had made the LRA "uncomfortable", but there is a measure of flexibility on both sides.

"Chissano's acceptance as mediator by both sides has added impetus to attempts at reconciliation. In this field, it is a big step forward when both sides agree on a mediator

and I think his status in Africa and the recent Mo Ibrahim Prize have added to his credibility," says Moloko Malakalaka, regional co-ordinator at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation.

Malakalaka warns, though, that calls for a truth and reconciliation commission inquiry into the years of bloodshed — which could incriminate government officials — and the International Criminal Court's warrant of arrest still hanging over members of the LRA remain major stumbling blocks for the initiative.

Chissano, meanwhile, hopes that the Africa Forum, a body of former African leaders that he chairs, will become more instrumental in resolving conflicts on the continent. "The Africa Forum is not made up of magic people, magicians, but people who may have a bit more time to travel, to go to places where there is conflict and to make contacts and to help them find solutions. These are people with experience, and they are available," he says.



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