

O. Wells *Sept 28*

FOREIGN SERVICE JOURNAL

SEPTEMBER 1991 \$3.50

DIPLOMACY'S HEART

HUMAN RIGHTS

CHILDREN OF WAR
Melissa Wells

WIDENING THE CIRCLE
Thomas Shannon

THE ABDUCTION OF SISTER DIANNA

*****5-DIGIT 20007
01602700 RT RD 0792 000
ALFRED WELLS
DEPT 241
3220 N STREET NW
WASHINGTON DC 20007

PLUS: Interviews with Henry Catto and Michael Novak

CHILDREN OF WAR

How Ambassador Melissa Wells helped reunite families in Mozambique

AN INTERVIEW BY ANN MILLER MORIN

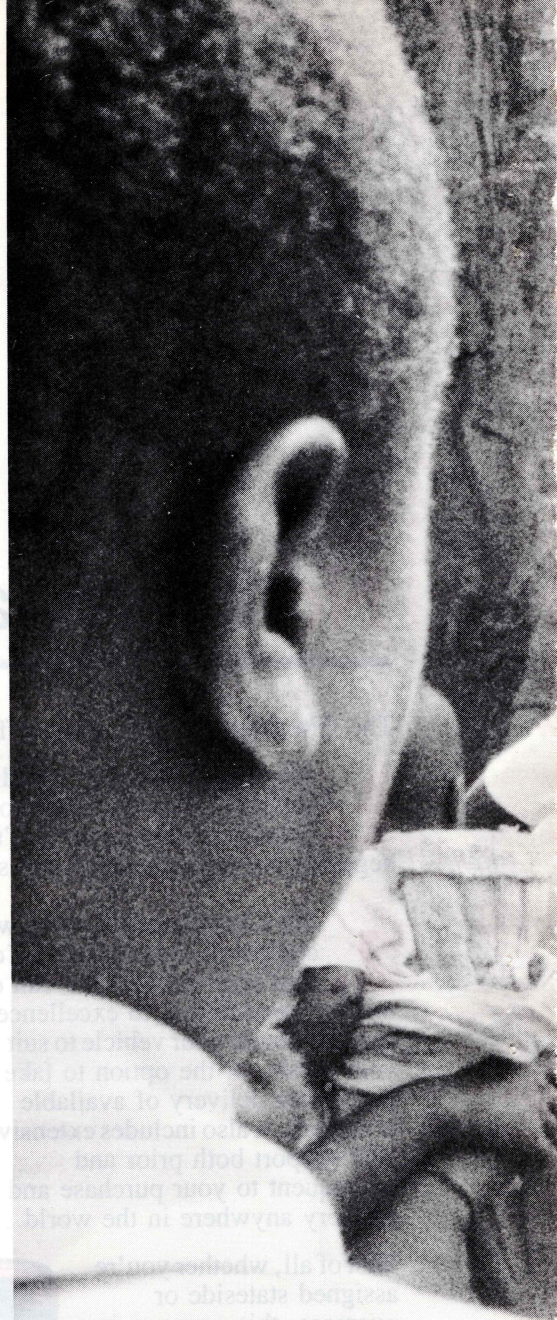
For a decade, forces representing the central government in Mozambique, FRELIMO (National Front for the Liberation of Mozambique), have been locked in a bloody civil war with RENAMO (Mozambique National Resistance). In this first-person account, former U.S. Ambassador to Mozambique Melissa Wells discusses the devastation wrought by war on the nation's people, especially the children. Posted in Mozambique from 1987 to 1990, Wells stepped beyond the usual responsibilities of an ambassador to report, negotiate, and represent the United States to promote the nation's healing, thus adding a new dimension to representation. She is currently serving as ambassador to Zaire.

The account is adapted by Ann Miller Morin from her oral history with Wells taped in 1991, a day following the PBS documentary, "Profiles in Diplomacy." The interview is part of the Women Ambassadors Project, and extracts will appear in a forthcoming book from Twayne Publishers of New York.

Melissa Wells with children in Mozambique

When Frenisi came to us at the Lhanguene center [a hostel established to help children traumatized by war], he wouldn't speak to anybody, wouldn't speak to the other children, wouldn't participate in any of the activities. He'd stay off in a corner by himself, and from time to time tears would pour from his eyes. I remember putting him on my lap, and he was like a little sack. I tried to cuddle him, but there was just no reaction whatsoever, except sometimes he cried. He was there for months on end, and nobody knew his story. We knew something must have happened that was horrible, but we didn't understand why he didn't talk to anybody. Before I tell you his story, let me give a bit of background on events in Mozambique.

There was a strong internal component to the war that was basically rooted in the mistakes that the FRELIMO made when they came to power at the time of independence. Why these had to be counteracted in such violent fashion and with the use of terror against





PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF DICK YOUNG PRODUCTIONS, LTD.

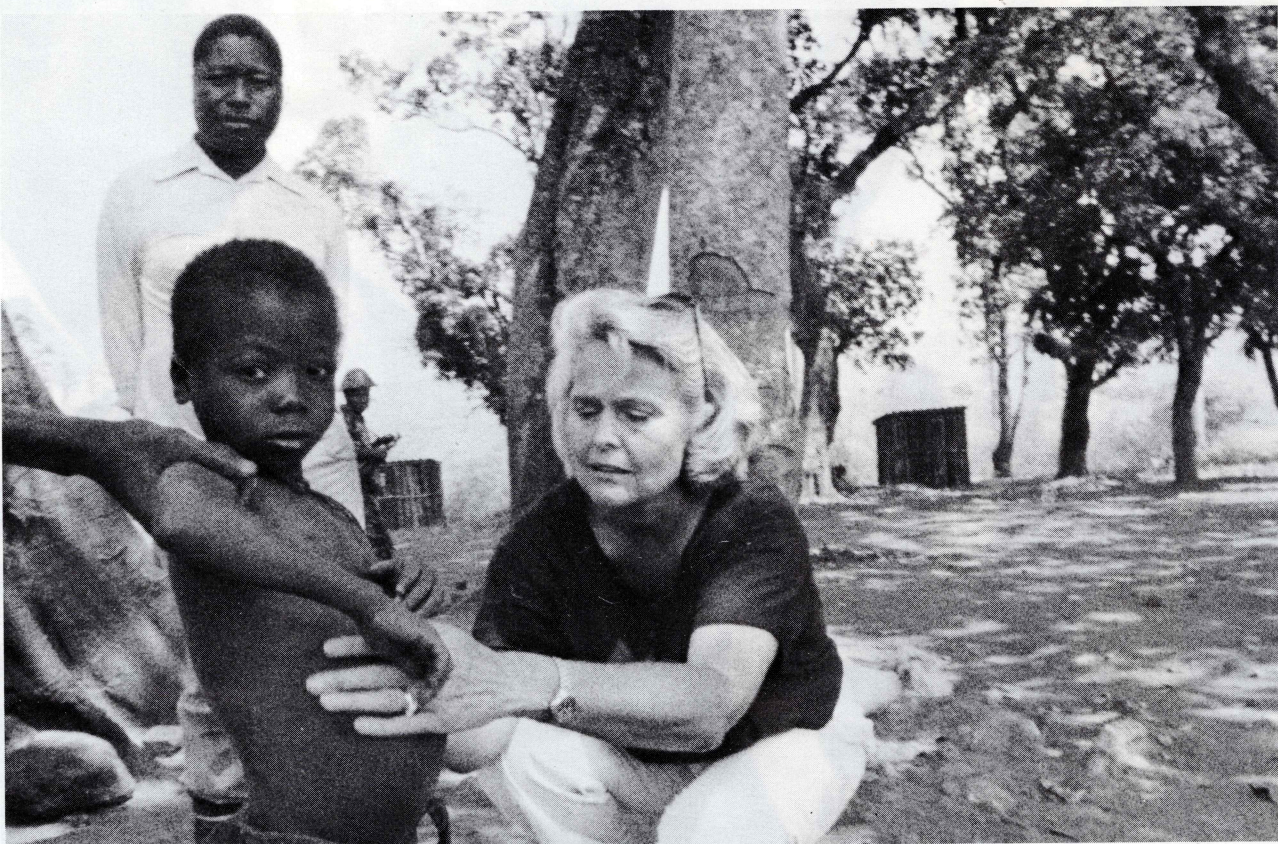
civilians is another question.

Thousands of people have been killed there during the last 10 years—100,000 is a modest estimate. I'm talking about RENAMO, which abducted and trained children to kill. What did they want these little children for? Well, many of the littler ones collected firewood, collected water, did chores around the camp. But there were others, stronger ones, the bigger ones, who became part of that whole guerilla concept and were found firing weapons at the army. That was a problem in itself, to get the army to hand over the children, because they didn't see them as children; they saw them as young boys carrying weapons. And we're talking about 10 and 11-year-olds!

To help children traumatized by exposure to an enormous amount of violence, we started a hostel for out-of-town children, Lhanguene. I'm very proud of that. I had a little bit of trouble getting it started, but I got the U.S. government to fund this project. We had to

have a place for the children, and the Mozambique government made that available. First, we had to get it fit to live in and Al, my husband, donated his services, supervising the plumbing and making sure the toilets worked, and so forth. When it was livable, I used to go at least once a week to be with the children. You couldn't handle it in a bureaucratic way. It wouldn't work. It had to be a hands-on project.

The key was bringing in specialized talent from the States. We didn't know what to do—what do you do with children who have been taught to bayonet and to kill? Do you just treat them like any other 12-year-olds, or do you put them in prison, or do you warehouse them because they're unsafe for society? These were issues that had to be discussed, because these are people who will be the adults of tomorrow. They're carrying this stuff around in their heads, and we have to cope with it. We in the United States are used to emergency programs, where we send food, medical



Wells visits victims of the civil war in Mozambique.

supplies, tents, blankets, you name it, but “shrinks”! That’s something else.

Dr. Neil Boothby from Duke University came. He’s a very well-known child psychologist who has worked with the problem of children and violence in Southeast Asia and in Central America. The idea was to develop a training model, because at that stage there was not one trained psychologist in all of Mozambique. Boothby developed a model to use to train local people: how to size up the children, how to spot which child might have post traumatic stress disorder, then how to assess it, how to draw out the child, how to deal with the problems in psychodrama. Dr. Boothby learned the children’s stories by having them draw pictures. That’s how we unlocked the mystery of Frenisi’s silence.

It was uphill work getting him to participate, but eventually he did, because he was attracted by the bright colors of the crayons and papers. He was asked to draw his home. Dr. Boothby has that drawing, the first drawing. He said, “Any person with minimal training in psychology can see that this child has a deep problem.” Gradually, through Frenisi’s pictures, the whole story came out. He had gone down to fetch water by the stream, as he did every day of his life. He came back to his family’s hut, and there were men with guns surrounding it. They told him to set fire to the hut. They gave him a torch. The hut is called a *palbota*, with a thatched roof, and the thing went up in flames. Immediately the parents came running out, and they were killed and then their heads were cut off.

The reason he wasn’t speaking was because he felt guilty—in his little 6-year-old mind, *he* was the one who killed his parents because he set fire to the *palbota*.

I was there when they reenacted the psychodrama. The other children, who had all had brutal experiences as well, played different parts, and little Frenisi was sitting, watching. The children reenacted the story according to Frenisi’s drawings, with the killings. Frenisi saw that there was nothing he could have done. You and I, hearing the story, arrive at the immediate conclusion he was forced to do it. But Frenisi had never clicked on that. He was just beset with rage and guilt that he was responsible for the death of his parents.

Once we’d broken through the barrier, Frenisi spoke. One time another child was having a birthday party, a little boy who had lost both his arms. I came with a birthday cake, and we had a little celebration. There was a new child who didn’t speak much; Frenisi kept bouncing back and forth from one end of the table to the other, going first to this little boy, and then to me, saying, “You know, he’s new here. He’s new here. He doesn’t talk very much.” It was as if he was saying, “I know you know me from when I didn’t talk at all.” But he was now in charge of this other little one, trying to help him, and making sure that everybody knew he was helping him.

In addition to therapy, we faced the problem of reuniting the children with their families, if they could be found. By the time I left Mozambique, we had

united 2,000 children—2,000—in a country at war, where people can't read, where they have never even seen a photograph of a loved one before. We managed to track down families—I won't always say the parents, because often the parents were killed, or we just didn't know what had happened to them.

We developed a procedure that Dr. Boothby had used successfully in another part of the world. From the children in the home we got clues to identity. The older they were, the better they remembered the name of the village, the name of their parents. The younger they were, the more difficult it was. We put together all the clues, and it became obvious some children come from a certain region. We'd photograph those children and have each



child speak into a tape recorder in his or her tribal language, saying, "I am Paulo. My mother's name is So-and-so," and as much else as they could recall.

I went with the team to Gaza Province where we first tried this. The people who were there were told to assemble at a certain point. We said, "This concerns children, your children possibly, children of your friends." So they came—I'd say maybe 500 people finally showed up. You could just see the mood of those people: "Let me get on with my work—I have to go get water, I have to do this, I have to do the other."

Our spokesman said, "We're going to show you photographs." It wasn't one single photograph, but sheets, quite large, almost poster-sized, that would have six, eight, sometimes 10 photographs of children on them. I remember watching the crowd look at these. They started passing them, mumbling and muttering. We told them, "If you think you might recognize someone, come up. You don't have to be sure. Just come up."

At one point a wonderful woman, an elderly woman, very dignified face, came up and pointed at a picture and said, "I think this is my grandson, Angelo." The children were not there with us, so the next step was to have her sit at a table; I sat with her. We got out the tape that Angelo had recorded and played it. I was so moved. I don't understand the language; they were speaking Shangaan. The woman sat across from me, looking down into the tape recorder (she'd never seen one in her life), and a voice came out of the tape recorder. Her face sort of crumpled up. I kept watching her face, and then tears started pouring down her cheeks. I got up and hugged her, because it was clear what was happening. She was hearing a voice she thought she knew. What the voice was saying matched the information she knew about her grandson, Angelo. And it was Angelo!

She and I composed ourselves. I turned the tape around, and *she* recorded for Angelo. I asked someone to translate for me from the Shangaan. She said, "This

is your grandmother." And she said, "Angelo, what you don't know is that your mother is alive. She came back to us two months ago and we killed a goat to celebrate."

We took the tape back to Angelo. But we had to be careful. Angelo had been through a terrible experience: he'd been abducted and lived in the rebel camps for a long time. You have to be very careful because a child must *want* to go back to the family. After the experience the child has gone through, he or she may like the safety of Maputo and the center. You can't just say, "We've found somebody who knows Angelo. Out with Angelo."

This was another interesting part of the process because the children didn't all immediately say yes. They thought about it; they thought about it. Angelo chose to be reunited with his grandmother and mother.

Frenisi was not so lucky. We couldn't find any of his extended family, and, obviously, his parents were dead. As we found homes for more and more children, it was very sad for the ones who were left, because they had bonded together as a group. Frenisi at this point kept saying, "I want to go back to my family. I want to go back to my family."

Frenisi had a best friend at the hostel, and we were able to locate his family. Before he rejoined them, before the two boys were separated, we approached this family and said: "The two boys are so close. We cannot find any trace of Frenisi's family, even in the extended concept of the African family. Will you agree to take him?"

And—this is the wonderful thing about Africa—although they were very poor people and had been through terrible times, they said, "yes." Frenisi found a home.

That's just one story. There are so many more . . . ■

The transcription of the oral history from which this article was drawn was made possible in part by a grant from the American Association of University Women Education Foundation.