

SA cops are battling Maputo car racket

By JENNIFER GRIFFIN
Maputo

JUST past the end of Maputo's main street, where a maze of hawkers sell vegetables, cashews and live chickens, young men sell stolen South African cars still bearing yellow Transvaal licence plates.

But three South African policemen have moved in to try to catch them.

"It is known that they sell stolen cars at the market. We've spotted a lot of stolen vehicles there," said Captain Jacobus van Tonder, who works with the SA Trade Commission in Maputo. "What they don't know is that we do trace these cars."

The policemen, from Pretoria, were assigned to Maputo two years ago to work with local police to investigate the booming market for stolen vehicles. They have returned 76 stolen cars worth R2.8 million to South Africa since January 1991.

Outside the market, two men lean against a red Datsun Pulsar trying to lure customers to buy their shiny vehicle. Its yellow



GOT YOUR NUMBER ... South African policeman Capt Jacobus van Tonder checks a stolen Transvaal car found on sale in Maputo

number plates are in stark contrast to the normal black Mozambican ones.

About one in 10 cars in Maputo now has SA plates. Many people don't know they are buying stolen merchandise.

Several other South African cars are being washed nearby in the market parking lot, before being shown to potential customers.

Even if the police do find a stolen car, they face difficulties trying to return the vehicle to South Africa. People claim they bought

the car legally. They show what look like authentic papers which turn out to be false — often to the owner's surprise.

It costs police a lot of money to send the vehicles back to South Africa.

"We have to take them in a convoy across the Namahasse road, which is 80 kilometres long and very dangerous," said Capt van Tonder. "We've passed places where trucks were still burning and shooting was still going on."

Cars with Transvaal

car racket

number plates are sometimes sold legally in Mozambique. South Africans drive to neighbouring countries where their old cars sell at a premium.

More recently, people have figured out how to double their money. The owner sells his car outside the country and claims it was stolen. He then collects insurance for the loss in South Africa.

"One of our biggest problems now is insurance fraud," said Capt Van Tonder, who has traced R1.5-million worth of vehicles where the owners attempted fraud.

German luxury cars and Toyota and diesel bakkies are the most popular vehicles.

"There are hundreds of fancy cars in this country, said Laubsher. "Where do they get the money? The per capita income a year is R200. This is the poorest country in the world."

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