

Mozambique traders split ST 11/6/95 over drug haul

THE unresolved case of Mozambique's largest-ever drugs haul last month has renewed calls for tougher drug laws while, apparently, widening a serious rift in the powerful Asian business community.

On May 7 Maputo police confiscated 40 tons of cannabis stashed in two trucks en route to an undisclosed destination.

Its estimated commercial value was US\$160-million (about R589-million), outstripping Mozambique's total export earnings last year of \$156-million (about R574-million).

Days later, police named Mohamed Equibal, a powerful shareholder in one of the nation's leading trade companies, in connection with the haul.

To date, however, Mr Equibal has not been arrested and no one has been taken to court.

Police claim they are continuing investigations, in secret, since "any revelations could help some of our leads, or even suspects, to disappear".

Initial investigations revealed the 40 tons of cannabis had been stored in tea company Emocha's warehouse in Maputo, under the name of Mr Equibal and his company, Gani Commercial.

Mr Equibal denied charges on the grounds that his real name is Ikbal and the company named on the warehouse bill might sound alike, but was not, unlike

By RACHEL WATERHOUSE: Maputo

his own Gani Commercial, of the AFT group.

The attorney-general says no two companies can legally register with the same name.

Furthermore, the cannabis was found disguised as cashew nuts, a crop which AFT packages for export in northern Nampula Province. The drug is thought to have come from Pakistan.

The case has divided the nation's powerful Asian business community of which Mr Equibal — or Ikbal — is a member.

In anonymous declarations to the press, the so-called community of "old" Indians, with roots in Mozambique for decades or even centuries, have accused Asian newcomers of using drug money to usurp their place in the market.

Further, they accuse the government of making life easier for newcomers from India or Pakistan, whose ill-gotten gains are making them more powerful than the "old" Indian community of professedly honest businessmen.

Popular opinion is that the case of the "40 tons" will never be brought to judgment.

Even if it is, the culprits will get off lightly. Mozambique's anti-drug laws, inherited from colonial legislation, are among the lightest in the world.