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A report from Nampula by  
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the Weekend Argus Africa  
Service

**N**EWSPAPER the slaughter of all 33 people on an emergency food convoy ambushed a week earlier in Mozambique's Manica Province was fresh in my mind when I joined a convoy of three trucks in the northern province of Nampula.

My introduction to the convoys came through Andre Jalmo, a government statistician, who I met while looking for anybody who could speak English in the city of Nampula. He became my only English-speaking contact and friend in more than 2 000 km of travel.

He promised to get me on to one of the convoys carrying cashew nuts to Nacala port, but, to our surprise, the convoy left on time and we missed it. Andre sped off in his United Nations-sponsored Land Rover in an attempt to catch up with them, warning me that he would go no further than 10 km out of town.

The 10 km mark is considered a relatively safe daytime distance which shrinks to less than 5 km at night as roving bandits go on regular looting and killing sprees.

Just as we reached the 10 km mark we spotted the convoy, which had been

stranded by a blow-out.

A ragged bunch of young men and boys, whom I guessed to be our military escort, lounged in the shade of two large cashew nut trees on the side of the road while Andre introduced me to one of the three shirtless drivers sweating profusely as he worked to repair the tyre.

Looking around anxiously, Andre made me farewell and sped off back to the safety of the city. Feeling decidedly uncomfortable under the stares of the soldiers, I decided nevertheless to join them under the trees to escape the oppressive tropical heat.

I recalled the stories about lawlessness and easy deaths that haunt the entire country, especially more recently in Nampula province.

I was also well aware of the rapacious status of the Frelimo Army whose members are often left without pay or food and have been known to kill and rob civilians as easily as any other of the bandit groups in Mozambique.

Wearing a motley array of civilian and military apparel and carrying battered AK47s and Soviet RPG rocket



TAKE A BREAK: Rest time in one of the small villages between Nampula and Nacala where rural hawkers try to sell sugar-reed and fruit.

Picture: Hans-Peter Bakker

launchers, the youngsters at first just stared at me, my cheap watch and my even cheaper shoes.

I tried hard to relax, smiled broadly at them and settled down to wait for the trucks.

Some of the youngsters, waving their weapons around casually, sidled up to me inquisitively.

My mouth felt dry and I took a sip of mineral water. One of the soldiers, leaping at the opportunity, reached

out at the bottle, saying "agua".

Returning his smile I handed him the bottle from which he took a deep swig, peering curiously at me to see what my reaction would be.

When he finished he wiped his mouth with his dirty sleeve, handed back the bottle and grinned widely only inches from my face.

That seemed to break the ice. The other soldiers came closer and the one who

drank my water wanted to know who I was.

We exchanged names in halting Portuguese as more soldiers gathered around us. Then my newfound friend wanted to know where I was from. "South Africa," I said, causing an immediate guffaw as they packed up laughing. They moved away from me in mock fear and the tone was set.

Next they started calling me Rambo and wanted to know if I could do karate and box and shoot. One even handed me his rifle.

At this stage, I feigned not to understand with a "non compreendo", but by then they were relaxed and we all settled down in a jovial mood to wait for the trucks to set off again.

After about an hour the trucks were ready, and piling on top of the cashew nut laden trucks, we took off.

The countryside between Nampula and Nacala is breathtaking with high granite moorlands dotting the lush, green landscape.

The narrow road, hemmed in by truck-high grasses, is in a deplorable state of neglect. Deep potholes allowed only very slow progress and we averaged about 20 km/h on the road.

As we passed numerous small villages the soldiers were generally greeted re-

acted  
har-  
cat-  
escort.

Loaded  
treated with  
wondered what  
rate in the Front  
was and hoped I  
become part of these  
tic since at least three  
barrels were jammed  
into my back and sides.

The journey went smoothly enough except for two more blow-outs which held us up for an hour each time. The last time we were stuck in a more isolated area and the hitherto casual soldiers became serious, grabbed their weapons and formed a large circle around the stranded convoy while repairs were done.

Night fell, but the convoy continued on its journey, sometimes driving fast, sometimes at a snail's pace while the soldiers tried to sleep as they were bounced about.

It took 10 exhausting hours, but we made it to the safety of Nacala, pleased that we had not become one of the hundreds of people who have died every year doing no more than we did — travelling on roads through Mozambique's rural bandit country.