

Our man in Africa — first into Mozambique

Monitor correspondent Gary Thatcher was the first person across when Rhodesia's border with Mozambique reopened after four years of hostilities between the two countries.

By Gary Thatcher

Machipanda, Mozambique

The crowd of Mozambicans was friendly enough, but still somewhat reserved.

After all, what had been coming into their country from Rhodesia over the past few years had hardly been welcome — air strikes, raiding parties, and missile attacks, for example.

But now the border was being reopened, and a clutch of curiosity-seekers, journalists, and Rhodesian officials were on their way over. The Mozambicans hardly knew what to expect.

As I walked into the 300 yards of "no man's land" between the two countries' border posts, the crowd moved back to clear a path. Some women were chanting a welcome, but mostly there were confused murmurs, uncertain smiles, and nervous laughter as the Mozambicans sized up their first visitor from across the border.

Finally, a stocky man yelled out in English, "So how are you?"

"I'm just fine," I answered, "and how are you?"

"I am fine, too," came his reply, and with that the crowd broke into laughter and cheering.

It was an exhilarating moment, heightened all the more by hours of doubt that it would ever take place.

The historic reopening of Rhodesia's links with black Africa had been preceded by a sort of comedy of errors. The event was to have taken place at 8:00 a.m. on Saturday, Jan. 12. But the Mozambicans, at that hour, were still clearing off vines that had overgrown the entry gate on their side.

The work proceeded fitfully, the laborers made jittery by the noise the Rhodesians made as they completed an unfinished task: the clearing of a mine field on their side of the border.

It quickly developed that the Mozambicans and Rhodesians had markedly different ideas on the proper way to open a border.

The Mozambicans marched out a delegation to the makeshift wire-mesh barrier separating the two counties, only to stand in embarrassed silence as land mines went off. They had forgotten to warn the Rhodesians of their approach. By the time Rhodesian officials hustled out to meet them, the Mozambicans had returned to their side.

When representatives of the two sides did synchronize their appearances, the relative importance they attached to the occasion became embarrassingly clear.

Mozambique's senior immigration officer, Henriques Madebe, was decked out in full ceremonial regalia, with gold braid spilling off his shoulder and a medallion

gleaming from his visored cap. His Rhodesian counterpart, burly Cedric Oelofse, wore rumpled white shorts and shirt.

The Mozambicans had expected a ceremonial opening — which was news to the Rhodesians. In fact, the Mozambicans were delaying the opening for the arrival of a high government official — a provincial governor. He finally arrived, some two hours late, but left in a huff when he found there was no similarly high-ranking official present on the Rhodesian side.

Finally, at 11:22 a.m. — some three hours behind schedule — the Mozambicans pulled down the fence and Rhodesia's isolation from black Africa was at an end.

I walked into the Mozambican immigration office at Machipanda, determined to get a Mozambican entry stamp in my passport to mark the occasion. But it was a futile effort: The Mozambican officials had all left their posts to join in the celebrating outside.

As I walked back toward Rhodesia, a group of young Mozambican girls shyly approached me. In halting English, they repeated a practiced greeting: "Good af-tuh-noon, good af-tuh-noon, good af-tuh-noon. . . ."

Guessing they were members of a Shona-speaking tribe, I returned the greeting in their own language. They roared their approval in cheers and whistles, and all the way back to the Rhodesian border I had a group of young escorts chattering away in both Shona and Portuguese (Mozambique's official language).

Their exact words were lost on me, but their smiles and laughter were enough to confirm the veracity of one of Mr. Madebe's earlier predictions.

Asked how white Rhodesians venturing into Mozambique would be treated, Mr. Madebe had said simply, "They will be welcomed."