

Slave trade still a booming business

SOUTH AFRICA'S slave trade — involving young girls abducted from Mozambique and sold to local men, who subject them to forced labour and often rape them — continues to flourish.

The slave syndicates, which were uncovered last year when an investigative team from *The Weekly Mail* purchased two slaves for R200 each from a trader operating in the eastern Transvaal homeland of kaNgwane, appear to have proliferated. Not a single trader has been convicted, despite evidence being handed to police about the practice.

In February this year one of the slave traders, known in Mozambique as *marianos*, lured six girls from Maputo

across the South African border to a village in the homeland of kaNgwane where he kept them in a kraal and invited prospective buyers around to see them.

"One of the girls, Sonia Sibiya, aged 13, was raped on the way to the border. She used the words 'I have been stolen' when she described her ordeal to us," says Sally McKibben, a fieldworker who runs a scheme that provides emergency aid to Mozambican refugees in kaNgwane.

"They were enticed into crossing the border by the trader, who promised them well-paying jobs in a shop in South Africa. They were still at school at the time and their parents did not know where they were."

A year ago The Weekly Mail exposed the slave syndicates.

Despite information being given to the police, the trade in people is growing.

By **EDDIE KOCH**

The girls broke out of the stockade where they were being kept and fled to a neighbour's home after hearing rumours that they were about to be sold to a local *inyanga* and killed so that their bodies could be used as *muti*.

Residents from the Ntsikazi district of the homeland, which borders on Mozambique's southern provinces,

insist that refugees who are brought by professional guides across the electrified fence that divides the two countries are frequently murdered and parts of their bodies sold to witchdoctors — although there is no documented evidence of this.

The neighbour, a Swazi woman from kaNgwane, directed the fugitives to a transit centre for refugees located in a village called Mangweni where McKibben works. Affidavits were taken from all of the girls and handed to the local police station so that charges of abduction could be laid against the trader, known to the girls as Alfonso.

Various forms of bondage, forced labour and sex slavery have developed around the large population of refugees

who flee into South Africa to escape Mozambique's civil war. But McKibben detects a common strand that runs through most of the accounts she has collected from victims of the trade.

A group of guides or agents have developed a lucrative business which involves bringing villagers from Mozambique across the electrified fence in South Africa for a fee that ranges from R150 to R250, depending on whether the fugitives want to be dropped off across the border or travel by taxi to Johannesburg.

Some of these guides offer a valuable service to people desperate to escape the extreme forms of brutality carried out by Renamo. But other unscrupulous dealers take advantage of the desperation caused by war. They offer young Mozambican girls a free ride across the border and a job in South Africa — a gesture of altruism that is a sure sign the agent is *mariano*.

Once they cross the frontier with the girls, who have no identity documents or official record of their existence, the traders sell them to men in the townships, who then try to justify the transaction by saying they have paid *lobola* and that the girls are now their wives.

In reality the "wives" are forced to have sex with their owners, cook for them, carry out domestic chores without any payment, and are frequently assaulted if they refuse. Many of the women complain that they are fed only scraps of food and left-overs from the meals they prepare.

Ironically, most accept this form of bondage, even though it is fairly easy to escape. To report their owner to the police is to invite being arrested as an illegal alien and sent back to Mozambique, where their fate is even more terrifying. They face famine, drought and a horrific form of slavery practised by Renamo bands who raid villages and force women to kill their husbands before force-marching them to bases where the widows are allocated to rebel commanders.

In January this year five young girls who found their own way across the electrified fence, known as "the snake" because of the lethal 3 000 volts it delivers to those who come into contact with it, were waiting at a taxi rank in a border village when they were picked up by a driver called Madonsela.

The man then took them to Johannesburg and visited various townships, apparently on the east Rand, looking for customers. Along the way he allegedly raped some of the girls and, after failing to sell them on the Reef, took them back to kaNgwane. There he allowed a friend to sleep with one of the captives while looking out for local buyers.

The girls escaped from a local motel and reported to the Mangweni transit centre. Refugee workers called in the kaNgwane police who took affidavits from the girls.

Madonsela was arrested and then released on bail. He has not yet been charged as all of the girls disappeared soon after he was released. The refugee workers have evidence that at least one of them was abducted by the trader.

Less than two weeks ago a team of health workers came across 17 adults and 19 children being held in a village called Block C at the home of a woman who is known to recruit people and sell them as chattels.

The team alerted refugee worker Rachel Ntsimbini, who visited the premises and returned the next day in a bid to rescue the group — only to hear from neighbours that the trader had been warned and promptly loaded the entire group into a single taxi bound for Johannesburg.

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A desperately narrow escape from slavery ... Anna Timba and her two daughters

Photo: PAUL STOBER

Last year an Australian television crew, working with a local reporter, "bought" a young girl from the same trader, interviewed her at a plush hotel nearby and then dumped her at the transit centre.

The incident, which highlights how easy it is to buy and sell human beings in this corner of South Africa, caused a rumpus at the time as the journalists failed to inform either their slave or the refugee workers about the purpose of their transaction, causing a panic in the area as villagers believed a new group of traders had come to town.

Indications are that the trade has spread far beyond kaNgwane. There have been isolated reports of women being sold into slavery in Gazankulu, a homeland that along with kaNgwane offers temporary refuge to war fugitives from Mozambique.

In the middle of last year *City Press* reported women were being sold in a squatter camp north of Pretoria called Winterveld, where a large number of Mozambicans live illegally. *The Weekly Mail* collected evidence that women had been kept at depots in Tembisa and other east Rand townships before being sold to local men.

"The kaNgwane police try to help but they are powerless in many respects," says McKibben. One of the biggest problems is that the absence of a law in South Africa that prohibits slave trading and police have to investigate alternative charges such as rape, abduction or kidnapping.

But refugees are an itinerant group of people. "They have to get a job. So witnesses can't hang around while the law takes its course. The girls feel they won't win the case anyway. So what's the point of hanging around when they could be looking for work."

After *The Weekly Mail's* exposé last year, the South African Police promised to investigate the trade and a detective from Nelspruit visited our offices to collect details about the trade and people involved in it. To date there has not been a single conviction.

Only kaNgwane and Gazankulu provide Mozambican fugitives with temporary support. South Africa does not recognise refugees and has stepped up a police and army campaign to arrest and deport the fugitives. Recent reports indicate 3 000 people are being repatriated to Mozambique each week.

McKibben believes this is at the core of the slave trade as the syndicates take advantage of refugees' fear of being deported to keep them in bondage.

Relief workers argue the best way to stop the racket is to allow the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) to administer a scheme that provides these people with temporary identification cards and protection from harassment.

The African National Congress favours this proposal but has done little to press for its implementation. A task force from the Convention for a Democratic South Africa's working group one, set up to look into the plight of refugees and the possibility of UNHCR involvement in their protection, visited kaNgwane and Gazankulu last month. Officials in the ANC's foreign affairs department did not participate in the work of the task force and appear to have been unaware of its existence.

The government is strongly opposed to the recognition of refugees and UN involvement in a scheme to protect them from being exploited. According to a government representative, quoted in minutes of the Codesa task force: "Once the UNHCR camps are established the local population will rise in anger because of the (preferential) treatment given to refugees."