

# Seeking a better life, she was sold for R200

By PAUL STOBER

THE only thing that saved Anna Timba from slavery was an absolute determination to escape the life to which her masters wanted to condemn her.

Through an interpreter she told how her family was broken up and she was driven into the clutches of a man who sells people for less than R500. She is not shy and her thin body seems to have shrugged off the abuse to which it was subjected.

In September 1989, after her village was attacked by the Mozambican rebel movement, Renamo, Timba fled to the relative safety of Maputo. She spent the next three months in the capital, struggling to eke out a living for her family by selling tomatoes on the streets.

In December that year, Timba received an offer she felt she could not refuse for the sake of her family. A *mariano* offered to take her to South Africa and find her a job. *Mariano* is the jargon used by residents of Maputo to describe people who lure Mozambicans to South Africa by offering them transport and jobs. Eager to start a better life and ignorant of the danger involved, Timba accepted.

Days later, the *mariano*, Mahulani Mapalani, herded Timba and her family, along with at least 80 other men, women and children, into an

open truck and drove them to the South African border. At an unmarked place, the group crossed the border on foot, were picked up by another truck and taken to Mapalani's farm in kaNgwane.

Timba and her family stayed at the farm for two months, sometimes watching others being quietly taken away.

After this time, Mapalani brought a man Timba knows only as Sibuyi, to the farm in a minibus. Mapalani told her that she must go home with Sibuyi.

He took Timba and her children to Tembisa on the east Rand, where he lived and ran a shop.

On the first night he demanded that Timba sleep with him. "You are my wife now — don't you know I paid that man money for you?" asked Sibuyi. Timba later discovered that he paid about R200 for her.

As punishment for not going to bed with him, Sibuyi locked Timba and her family out of the house when he went to market.

Determined to get away from this man she knew nothing about, Timba managed to steal two R5 notes from the shop. Using the money, Timba bought a box of bananas which she sold while she was locked out of the house. Over the three months she was with Sibuyi, Timba managed to squirrel away R75.

One day in May she scooped up her

family and using the money, caught a taxi back to Mapalani — "because he was the only one I knew".

Timba confronted Mapalani and accused him of selling her. He admitted he had done so, asking: "How else am I going to get my money back?" According to Timba, in Maputo, he had said nothing about her having to pay him.

By way of an apology, Mapalani promised to get her "a better husband".

Timba reminded him that she was already married and wanted work, not a husband. Mapalani responded with: "There is nothing for you to do here and you must go."

Before long, he had sold Timba and her children again; this time to Philip Mahlalela for about R450.

Mahlalela dismissed Timba's refusal to sleep with him and during her first two nights with him she was brutally raped. After that, though he did not sexually molest Timba, he assaulted her almost every day. He spared the children.

Mahlalela was unemployed but sometimes did the rounds of his brothers, asking for money and food which he shared with her and the children. Timba was forced to plait hair each day to raise the R4 she needed to feed all of them.

While she was working, Timba heard about a centre nearby which

took care of Mozambican refugees. She bolted from Mahlalela's house late one night, and walked with her daughters until she reached Mangweni, kaNgwane, the next morning.

In Shongwe, Timba met refugee fieldworker Sally McKibben, and made a detailed statement about what had happened to her over the past months. The refugee project then helped Timba and her family settle in "Block A" of the nearby township.

But Timba's fears of the slave traders are far from over. After writing to her family, Timba discovered her younger sister, Wilhemina, had been brought to South Africa by a man who claiming she (Timba) had sent him to fetch her.

After making inquiries among Mozambiquan refugees, she discovered another *mariano*, known as Sedake, who claimed her sister was being held on a nearby farm. He promised that if she gave him R20 he would fetch her sister. McKibben gave Sedake the money, who left and has yet to return.

Despite this disappointment, Timba is determined to track her sister down.

In the meantime Timba has established a life for herself. She teaches at a pre-school for the children of refugees and has a close circle of friends.

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