

# Porous border is smugglers' paradise

Sean O'Toole and Paul Botes take a journey along the border from Pontdrift to south of Komatipoort to find the gaps in a broken system

It is boring sitting in an office," says Captain Hamilton Madona as he steers his army bakkie along a pitted military road north of Musina, a rough-and-tumble border town about 10km north of the oily green Limpopo River. "I enjoy being on the ground, getting more exposure. I'm an infantryman."

It is evening, still mercilessly hot on South Africa's national boundary with Zimbabwe. The military road we are driving along follows an undulating riparian route, the river largely invisible because of the elaborate security fencing installed a hundred or so metres from the swollen water mass.

Variably known as the "kaftan", "nabob" and "norex" fence, this border security device, erected in phases in the mid-1980s, is a sort of rococo version of the defence architecture that has become a feature of suburban homes in Gauteng.

Its design is roughly consistent all along its 268km northern span from a farm known as Eendvogelpan, about 20km east of the Pontdrift border with Botswana, to the northern Kruger Park border with Zimbabwe, as well as its 62km length from Komatipoort, on the southern Mozambique border to Jeppe's Reef near Swaziland: two razor-wire barrier fences flank a pyramid of coiled razor-wire that shields a series of electrified wires, which pre-1990 were set to administer a lethal shock. (The Kruger Park, which has electrified animal fences, is a border category unto itself.)

The South African Defence Force, a precursor of the reformed South African National Defence Force (SANDF), reported that these electric fences caused 89 deaths between August 1986 and August 1989. A 2001 Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation study proposed a figure of at least 100 deaths prior to February 1990, when the fence was finally turned to non-lethal alarm mode.

At present the electrical current is completely out of action. Attempts by the SANDF to effect basic repairs to the fence at Beitbridge have proved largely unsuccessful. The SANDF was tasked by government in May last year with resuming police duties along the Zimbabwe and Mozambique borders as part of a R135-million exercise named Operation Corona.

It seems an antiquated, almost quaint way of dealing with an ancient problem and is, at least on the surface, somewhat at odds with the Southern African Development Community (SADC) protocol. In 2005 SADC tabled big plans for regional integration which would allow easier movement — for goods and people — across borders in the region, with South Africa's buy-in, at least on paper. But it's not something that has translated into policy on the ground.

Catherine Grant, from the South African Institute for International Affairs, recently told the *Mail & Guardian* that while there was "significant rhetoric on South Africa's commitment to regional integration" the reality is it's "often not met by action, including on the free movement of people". (See "Pretoria's African agenda", page 18.)

Meanwhile, the border fence continues to be trampled, cut and burrowed beneath by smugglers, poachers and

migrants illegally moving across the border, much as it has for years.

But it is the smugglers who particularly intrigue the army captain, a tall, lean man who joined Five South African Infantry Battalion (5SAI) in Ladysmith nine years ago with a qualification in financial accounting. Unlike his 2004 peacekeeping mission in the strife-torn eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, gunfire is a rare occurrence in Musina.

Criminal activity along the Limpopo River is largely marked by its stealth and cunning, a *modus operandi* that extends back more than a century to a time when white labour brokers on horseback trafficked in particular in Mozambican labour for the mines in Johannesburg, especially in the Pafuri region.

This perennial lawlessness, which is evoked by the ruptured fences, well-worn footpaths and Médecins Sans Frontières posters and pamphlets warning migrants at Beitbridge about rape (242 cases were identified by the agency in 2010), is partly reflected in the nickname given the criminal gangs that prey on unsuspecting migrants and, more recently, smuggle cigarettes: *guma guma*.

In Venda, a language commonly spoken on both sides of the border, refers to a swallowing action. Picture, as the bellicose policeman explaining the word to me at Pafuri border post did, a child sneaking into a pantry and surreptitiously stuffing his mouth with sugar.

The captain's interest in the is, however, tactical not etymological. "They are the masters of this place," says Madona. "They know all the corners."

According to the captain these local confidence tricksters and brigands employ scouts and decoys armed with cellphones to guide mules, young men who are paid between R150 and R200, across the border with their cargo. Once delivered, the cigarettes are usually transported by road to Gauteng, which accounts for about 70% of the market for the illegal trade in cigarettes nationally.

"On Monday we caught 12 men heading back to Zimbabwe," says Madona. The men detained by Madona's troops said they were simply returning from visiting friends. The abrasions on their lower backs, the result of carrying a standard load of two cigarette boxes, each containing 52 cartons, across the border, suggested otherwise. When pressed, the men admitted that the cigarettes had already left Musina for the south.

While the capture of illegal migrants is commonplace along the border, the military rarely captures the smugglers.

"They know that we are not going to shoot at them," says Madona. "Usually they drop the boxes when they see us and run for their life back

**"While there is significant rhetoric on South Africa's commitment to regional integration, the reality is it's often not met by action ..."**



Smugglers in Musina (above) pierced a pipe that continues to pump water from a defunct mine. About 20 people rely on this vital life source.

Zimbabweans queue for asylum (left). While economic migrants are not eligible for asylum in terms of the Refugees Act, there is widespread abuse of the system (left). Morgan Said (bottom left) dodges soldiers to smuggle cigarettes across the Beitbridge border. Photos: Paul Botes



to Zimbabwe where they regroup. Then they come again with the same number of boxes. They already have a deal on this side and somebody is waiting for them to report."

This frustrating routine, at least for the SANDF, plays itself out nightly along the Limpopo River border. It is also increasingly coming to define life along the porous southern Mozambique border. A Komatipoort farmer told me of a cigarette stash he found recently in his sugarcane plantation.

The extent of the cigarette smuggling activities in the 4 040km<sup>2</sup> Soutpansberg Military Area, a district that includes the national borders with Botswana and Zimbabwe, is recorded in blue felt-tip pen on a notice board at 5SAI's command headquarters, a squat brick building just south of Musina.

The tally of cigarette seizures over the public holiday weekend in March totalled 512 cartons, but no pistols, cocaine or vehicles, which appear on a table of "operational successes" pinned to the notice board. The cigarettes, which are immedi-

ately handed over to the South African Revenue Services after they are seized, were valued at R230 520.

"The illegal trade in cigarettes is the biggest single threat to the sustainability of a legitimate industry," says Francois van der Merwe, chief executive of the Tobacco Institute of Southern Africa (Tisa), an industry lobby group. He estimates that of the 26- to 27-billion cigarettes consumed in South Africa last year, 5.5- to 6.2-billion were illegally brought into the country, chiefly from Zimbabwe.

"That is more than 20% of the total market," says Van der Merwe, whose organisation is actively involved in awareness, intelligence and disposal projects aimed at stemming the tide.

"If you translate six billion cigarettes just into excise tax, the loss was in excess of R2.6-billion. That excludes VAT and the losses of a legitimate industry."

In Musina, a town that is clearly profiting from the demise of the Zimbabwean economy — there is a new R200-million shopping mall, huge lots on the outskirts of town filled with used Japanese cars destined for

Zimbabwe, advertisements for new industrial townships — cigarette smuggling has grafted an additional layer of complexity onto an already dynamic situation.

A number of factors account for the growing influx of illegal cigarettes into South Africa, not the least being the resurgence of Zimbabwe's tobacco industry. Last year the country unexpectedly produced a bumper tobacco crop, a fact partly attributed to the 40 000 smallholder farmers increasing their stake in the national output to almost 70%. Chinese merchants acquired a third of this 2010 unprocessed tobacco crop, which is still half the record 230-million kilogram yield achieved in 2000 when farm seizures began.

The first year of Zimbabwe's disastrous entry into the new century was marked by another significant event for the tobacco industry. In 2000 Rothmans of Pall Mall (Zimbabwe) and British American Tobacco (Zimbabwe) merged to form British American Tobacco Zimbabwe (BATZ). The merger, which resulted in an outright monopoly for the new company, was approved by the Zimbabwean competition commission with the proviso that BATZ sell its surplus cigarette-making equipment by public tender to allow for competition in the industry.

This resulted in the founding of Cut Rag Processors, which, in 2001, launched Remington Gold, a popular Zimbabwean cigarette brand that is even quoted by name on 5SAI's ops board. The brand's distinctive blue packaging is also a pervasive feature of Musina's roadside litter, especially around the refugee reception centre, a brick building without any identifying signage that is a busy hive of activity from five in the morning.

"The problem," says Van der Merwe, whose organisation's members include British American Tobacco, "is not that the product is manufactured



SANDF soldiers (left) patrol the Limpopo River, a hotbed of cross-border crime and smuggling activity. A cigarette smuggler (right) transports a small load in a homemade bag



illegally in Zimbabwe", it arises when these cigarettes are transported illegally across the border.

"The excise on a packet of 20 cigarettes is R9.73, excluding VAT," says Van der Merwe.

"That is a huge margin. If you smuggle a container across the border, the duty on a container of cigarettes is in excess of R4-million. You can retire off one container load of smuggled cigarettes."

A minor sideline activity hinted at by farmers and migrants when I visited Musina in 2002 and 2003, cigarette smuggling has grown sharply in the area in the past year, largely due to successful policing of the problem elsewhere in the country.

"Last year one of the major problems was OR Tambo," says Van der Merwe. "We began to tighten up on the airport and suddenly the transportation mechanism shifted from air to road freight."

Beitbridge is now a hotspot, he says. According to a government worker at the border post, it is difficult to monitor imports because they do not have a weighbridge and an experienced eye is needed to determine whether a truck with paperwork indicating a load of bananas is not, in fact, carrying cigarettes.

"When you clamp down on the containers at Beitbridge they start using foot soldiers or mules," says Van der Merwe. "They break the cargo into small loads that people can carry across non-designated ports."

Morgan Said, a 23-year-old Shona-speaking father of two is one such foot soldier.

It is early morning at the abandoned copper mine founded by John Grenfell in 1904 and situated in the centre of Musina.

Said is wearing only his blue Snoopy boxer shorts. The rest of his clothing, which he has just washed, is drying on a green pipe that contin-

ues to pump water from the defunct mine, closed in 1992. The pipe, which has been pierced at two points, is a vital life source. It provides water to seven shack dwellers and dozen or so men who sleep rough on the former mine property, now owned by the council.

In his slightly wheezy voice Said explains the uncomplicated procedure involved in smuggling cigarettes. It is an hour's hike from the mine to the Zimbabwean border town of Beitbridge, where he will be put into a team and given two boxes, which he will convey in a homemade bag. "The owner will be waiting for you on the other side, white guys with a lot of cash," he states. "If there are 100 boxes, they bring a truck."

What about the army patrols?

"The army has been looking for people for a long time," he says, laughing. "Us, we are soldiers, we don't wait for that army. When they stop and wait, we run away with the stuff."

Said's bravado is partly intended for the amusement of his audience, an itinerant group of young men, some of them extended family, who live by their wits on the periphery of Musina's multilayered economy.

When not pushing trolleys for Zimbabwean day-traders, they will haul illegal cigarettes for rich white men or scavenge for scrap metal at the rapidly disassembling mine compound.

Functioning as a sort of no-nonsense spokesman for the group, Said has a softer side.

A member of the Zion Christian Church, his allegiance is tattooed on his right arm. He talks fondly about the khaki uniform and "nice shoes" worn by the faithful. Sometimes, he says softly, while lying on the floor of a building marked with the charcoal inscription "Mashonja Bedroom", he still prays. (Mashonja is Shona for



The border fence at Komatipoort is part of a barbed wire barrier which stretches hundreds of kilometres from Botswana to Mozambique

mopane worm.)

Said has lived in Musina for two years and even though he claims to have an asylum seeker's permit, which he renews at intervals, he is not interested in following the cigarettes and moving to Gauteng. He was dissuaded by the xenophobic violence he witnessed in Pretoria in 2008, while lodging his application for political asylum.

Wary of the "fast life" in Gauteng, Said says his goal is to live slowly, "so that I can survive until 40 or 50 years".

It is a pragmatic assessment, statistically feasible too. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) the average life expectancy of a Zimbabwean is 47. Last year the country ranked bottom of a multidimensional poverty index of 169 nations compiled by Oxford University and the UNDP, four places behind Mozambique.

The new measure, which rates poverty based on a broad range of criteria coalescing around issues of

health, education and living standards, offers a useful means for understanding the recent migratory patterns affecting this country.

According to Jackson McKay, the deputy director general of immigration services for home affairs, economic migrants are ineligible for refugee status in terms of the Refugees Act. Zimbabwean migrants are not exempt from this ruling but, as McKay concedes, "there is a great deal of abuse by economic migrants of the asylum seeker process".

It is an opinion corroborated by documentary filmmaker Annie Holmes. Speaking at the Cape Town launch of a book published in the United States — *Hope Deferred: Narratives of Zimbabwean Lives* — of oral testimonies, which she co-edited with Peter Orner, Holmes said the funnelling process at Musina and the asylum application procedure in general has led many ordinary Zimbabweans to fuse narratives of economic hardship and political violence. Sometimes the two realities are entangled, at other times not.

This notion of entanglement, of things being at once divisible and yet not, struck me while sat one morning on Musina's main road, doing pretty much what a lot of people around me were doing, nothing in particular.

I saw a teenage boy on his morning run and an elderly woman doing a brisk walk in lightweight exercise gear. One was black, the other white. I counted one, two, three bakkies, each improbably overloaded with people, each in need of a push-start. I saw a man with mismatching shoes singing as he walked down the main road, past a woman sweeping the pavement in front of her cardboard box shop, its meagre offering displayed on a plastic plate.

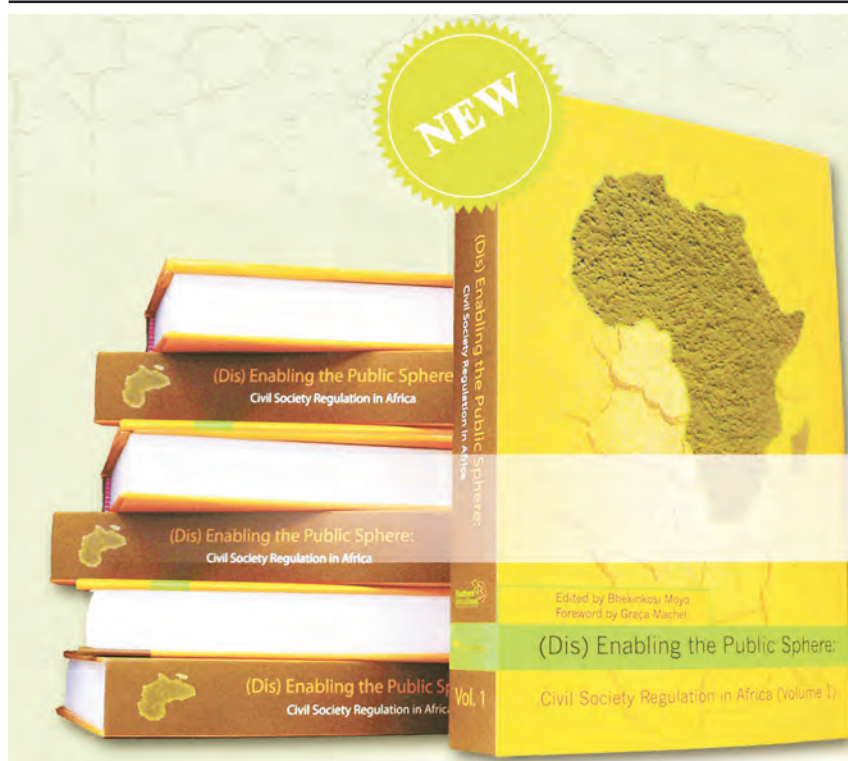
Border territories bring out the worst in people and hide their ordinariness. Sometimes their loneliness is what allows us, visitors from the centre, to understand what we don't elsewhere.

Near the small Pafuri border post, a fenced encampment amid fever trees near the meeting point of South Africa, Zimbabwe and Mozambique, there is a dust road that leads to a separate rangers' compound. There is an old weather-beaten sign here. Erected in 1939, it reads "The Employment Bureau of Africa Ltd".

It was to this malarial nowhere that labour recruiters routinely came to sing their sweet songs about the good life in Johannesburg.

In 1906 Mozambicans accounted for 71% of the labour force on Witwatersrand mines. One hundred and two years later, at Ramaphosa settlement on the East Rand, a Mozambican man, bricklayer Ernesto Alfabeto Nhamuave, a legal migrant who came to South Africa in 2006, was savagely murdered because he was from other side of the busted old fence.

Perhaps we had forgotten how entangled our lives have become across these borders.



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