

Private crayfish farm has vital role in Mozambique

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EXACTLY 2 000 feet above the northeast coast of Mozambique, Mario Marques adjusts his Raybans and switches the 14-seater Cessna Caravan to manual.

With the powerful engine eased down to idle, the Spirit of Chiloane, glides down onto a broad swathe of sand lined by the Indian Ocean.

Chiloane, a palm-fringed island 100km south of Beira, is remarkable for two things.

First, it is an idyllic place where windchimes tinkle under a cashew tree and the only crowds are the crayfish teeming in the mangrove swamps.

Second, it is the site of the first private investment enterprise in one of the world's poorest countries, where 16 years of civil war have claimed more than 1-million lives.

The key relationship in the enterprise began several years ago in a bustling Washington bar — a scene light years removed from the tranquility of Chiloane.

William Friedman, a Texan millionaire banker and political consultant versed in the vagaries of life on Capitol Hill, introduced himself to Joao Chissano, then Mozambique's foreign affairs minister.

Five years and \$3m of investment later — with Chissano becoming president in the meantime — the friendship between the two men has produced a glimmer of hope for the future of Mozambique and a reminder of the days when Lourenco

Marques was the jewel of southern African tourism.

The progeny of the relationship is a crayfish farm on Chiloane from whose emerald waters and mangrove swamps two tons of seafood were flown to Johannesburg last month.

The shipments will continue up to an optimum level of 20 tons a month, most of which will appear in restaurants and shops in Johannesburg and other SA cities.

The establishment of the first investment project in Mozambique which does not involve state, multinational or aid-oriented funding has not been an easy task.

Mecca

Hindered by red tape, security fears and the fearsome logistics of shipping generators, fibre-glass boat moulds, cement and a mini-tractor to the island on a small aircraft, the project at last is producing the kind of quality fare which helped make Lourenco Marques a seafood mecca.

But apart from providing a Mozambican economy suffering from an R8,2bn external debt with a little inflow of foreign exchange, not to mention more than 100 jobs that Friedman's Harrill Seafood Inc provides on Chiloane, the enterprise could even have an influence on the country's political future.

Deep in the heart of Renamo territory, with the frequency of attacks

against agricultural and industrial installations on the increase in the past few weeks, Chiloane appears to be a perfect guerrilla target. It is protected by little more than the enthusiasm of the island's 4 000 inhabitants, strong currents in the stretch of water between it and the mainland, and four rusted Lee Enfield rifles.

And yet, as relations between Renamo and Chissano's Frelimo government have begun to thaw — as signalled by the signing of a protocol on electoral law last week which is likely to culminate in elections later this year — it appears both sides have recognised the need and value of enterprises such as the crayfish farm.

The venture on Chiloane is exactly the kind of private enterprise and free market project that Renamo has been fighting for over the past 16 years, a Renamo representative said.

Now Friedman is hoping to bring Chissano and Renamo leader Afonso Dhlakama together on the island for a meeting.

Friedman's close contacts with the financial and political community in the US could also be helpful in attracting the kind of foreign investment Mozambique desperately needs.

However Mozambique's proposed elections turn out, the need to ensure the success of private investment projects like Chiloane's crayfish farm has been acknowledged by all concerned.