

WHERE ZIMBABWE'S MOST POPULAR EXPORT IS WATER

CHICUALACUALA.

THERE is little to show that one is in a foreign land save for a fading billboard warning of the presence of a minefield and a solitary barefoot guard who insists on scribbling the car registration in a soiled notebook.

A further five minutes' drive provides the proof — rows of bullet-riddled shanties. There is no sign of life except for a pig and its litter foraging through a rubbish dump.

But just when it seems this Mozambican border town has degenerated into a ghost town, there is the lively railway marshalling yards — scene of all activities except the one it was meant for.

Our convoy is cause for excitement for the hundreds of women and girls milling around two rail tankers where they fetch their daily water rations. The water is imported from Zimbabwe, reportedly at \$40 a tank.

There are hundreds more milling at the railway station's waiting room and at first sight they could pass for South Africans, judged by their dress and

Convoy time is party time at Chicualacuala

Afrikaans twang. In fact, one learns later, they are recent returnees from South Africa's gold mines.

One of them, Lorenzo, claims he has been stranded at the station since early January. There have been no trains since and like the rest, he looks forward for the day they will have to detour through Zimbabwe to another post not cut off from the rest of the country by the MNR bandits, notorious for burning anything combustible.

His fears were later confirmed by the prevention of natural calamities officials — our hosts — who had to be flown in from Maputo.

But before the arrival of the officials,

we were at the mercy of a customs official who constantly referred to himself as "chefe" and laboured to explain the joys of living in the town.

It's questionable whether his views are shared by the hordes of men who apparently spend their day "getting on", lounging under the shade of verandahs and some trees not familiar to Zimbabweans.

He hurriedly goes through our papers and then sends for a rubber stamp to clear the 21 Zimbabwean-assembled trucks and tankers donated by the United Singing Artists for Africa for drought relief.

He then marshalled us to the administrator's office where our predicament

was worsened by language problems. At one stage tempers rose and discussions became strictly businesslike.

But the blow was yet to come. The officials demanded every truck be tested for roadworthiness, an agonising task for the Zimbabweans, who hesitantly played along even though they had just driven the vehicles for close to 700 km from Harare.

But our army escort appeared to be enjoying every minute of it, conveying greetings to colleagues and dishing out goodies to scores of waifs jostling around.

Finally, all done and hands shaken and well-wishing iraded, one is battling to contain thirst for, given the circumstances, it would have sounded impolite to ask for water.

To cap the agony, the sun was beginning to make its force felt especially by the unacclimatised Zimbabweans, some of whom shed their executive jackets.

But the place has an irresistible attraction and one longs for a return visit and an improvement. — Ziana.