

Mozambican teacher got lesson in politics

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MAPUTO, Mozambique — This is the story of high school history teacher Geronimo Simbine.

On Aug. 23, 1983, he went on a brief holiday visit to a friend. Nineteen months later he was recovering his freedom from South African kidnappers, the South African Army and a Mozambican jail.

He told his tale while sitting in the parlor of his civil-servant brother's house overlooking Maputo's Indian Ocean coastline. The story is so beyond North American experience that it is almost humorous — except that his life for the moment is wrecked. He has lost his job, his fiancée and the best part of two years.

Mr. Simbine is a pawn-speck in the violent geopolitics of southern Africa — a short, shy, 25-year-old pedagogue who, when asked his feelings about what he has gone through, replied: "It was written for myself to live like that."

Written or not, what his story implies is that the South African Government's hands are still dirty in the internationally neglected war of economic and military destabilization being waged against Mozambique despite the non-aggression pact signed by the two countries 14 months ago.

Mr. Simbine was teaching in the Mozambican port city of Beira. On Aug. 23, 1983, he arrived at the small town of Namaacha where the borders of Swaziland, South Africa and Mozambique meet, to visit his friend Felix Dimene, 27, a fellow teacher and the brother of his girl friend.

Mr. Simbine recounts that he, his friend and eight other members of the Dimene family were awakened in the middle of the night by 15 armed men — six of them white and speaking Afrikaans, the rest black and speaking Portuguese, and all wearing camouflage uniforms — who burst into the Dimene house.

The two teachers were taken prisoner; the others in the house were tied up. The armed men then went to a neighboring house, killed a Portuguese farmer and took prisoner his 83-year-old cook.

The three were then loaded on to a truck, spirited across the border and driven 240 kilometres through the night to an old house in Phalaborwa, a mining and army town in South Africa's eastern Transvaal. They were put into the basement and left there for three days without food and water.

Then they were given nourishment and the questioning began; the interrogator was always an Afrikaans-speaker, using a Portuguese translator.

Mr. Simbine now learned why he had been kidnapped. According to his interrogator, the house occupied by his friend Felix had been used by the African National Congress, the

outlawed group in opposition to the South African Government.

(Mozambique at that time was the main base for ANC guerrilla attacks on South Africa. After the signing of the Nkomati Accord in March, 1984, the Mozambican Government banned ANC military activity from its territory.)

Mr. Simbine said that despite his and his two companions' denials of any knowledge of ANC activity, they were kept in the basement of the house for three months.

They then were moved to the jail at the main army base and interrogated for another three months, for about an hour a day. The questions were always the same: What were they doing in the house? What did they know about the ANC? Where was the ANC office in Maputo? Where did ANC members live in Maputo?

"I didn't know," said Mr. Simbine, "because I was a schoolteacher."

This was now February, 1984 — less than one month before the signing of the Nkomati Accord.

Mr. Simbine said he was told by his captors that he could have a job in the army. "I could not refuse." He and Mr. Dimene were given training for six months and made orderlies at a monthly salary of 160 rand (about \$110). The old cook was allowed to go and moved just outside the army base.

Mr. Simbine said he heard about Nkomati but was afraid to talk about it. He was told there were about 15 other Mozambicans in the camp — illegal immigrants who had been caught by South African authorities and press-ganged into the army.

Finally, in November, he was given a leave of 29 days, which suggests he must have had a measure of trust from his captors.

By bus and train, he travelled back to the Mozambican border, climbed over a two-metre frontier fence, and was home. He said he went alone because his friend Felix was too afraid to go with him.

Once back in Mozambique, Mr. Simbine said, he went to the nearest police station, and promptly was put in jail for the next five months for questioning. He was let out — and interviewed by the Mozambican press — after the South African Government stated in mid-March of this year that no Mozambicans were being kept in South African military bases near the border.

His teaching job has been given to someone else and, despite Mozambique's shortage of teachers, a new job had not been approved for him. His fiancée had moved to another town and had made no attempt to contact him.

He doesn't know if his friend Felix Dimene is still alive.