

Renamo prisoners say they escaped

Staff Reporters

University of the Witwatersrand academic Professor David Stephenson (40) and Zimbabwean businessman, Mr Dudley Searle (46), who were abducted by Renamo troops in the Beira Corridor on February 16, were not released — they escaped — relatives said last week.

Earlier this month, Renamo claimed the two men had been released as part of an Easter truce, but both denied statements by the terrorists that they had been released on humanitarian grounds.

60 km WALK

Professor David Stephenson was reunited with his wife and family at Jan Smuts Airport on April 18 after spending a harrowing two months held hostage — and he vowed not to return to the country until the war was completely over.

Professor Stephenson said they escaped on April 13 and walked 60 km through thornveld until they were rescued by the Zimbabwean National Army on April 15.

Sporting a straggly beard, swollen feet and bruises and cuts over his face and body, Professor Stephenson said their escape took nearly two months to plan when they realised they would not be released.

The men were seized by the Renamo rebels on February 16 while they were driving to inspect roads in Pungwe near Beira.

"We stopped near a Frelimo base to right water bottles that had fallen over when we were surrounded by children with automatic rifles — I thought they were beggars at first but they turned



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out to be Renamo bandits.

"We were moved from base camp to base camp and then to forest camps. Although we were treated well physically, we were constantly deceived and lied to about our release. This, combined with reports on the news about people being killed by the rebels, was mental torture.

"So we built up an escape plan. We pretended we had malaria and looked delirious and mad, then we built up our strength, got fitter, accumulated rations and prepared ourselves."

The men walked, crawled and fought their way through forests of thorn bushes and trees because they were too terrified to take paths.

DEBRIEFED

The men were debriefed by the Zimbabwean army, who also cleaned them up and gave them extensive medical treatment.

His wife, Mrs Lesley Stephenson, spent two traumatic days when reports were released that the men had been set free.

"I knew this could not be true but I did not know where my husband was. Only when I heard he had escaped did everything fall into place," she said.