

Renamo raids U.S. couple's eccentric enterprise

BILL and Becky Friedman, Washington wheeler-dealer and Texas deb starring in their own version of *The African Queen*, have now found out all there is to know about Catch-22, Mozambique-style.

For the past four years this unlikely couple have been battling to establish a fishing business that would allow Mozambicans to benefit from one of their country's richest resources.

Hitherto the fight has been against the Frelimo government's numbingly venal bureaucracy. But just when they thought they had won the battle — thanks in no little measure to the intervention of President Joaquim Chissano — up crops a new obstacle.

The Thursday before last a

By SIMON BARBER
Washington

detachment of 20 Renamo rebels stormed ashore on the island of Chiloane, a sun-bleached atoll that is the site of the Friedmans' fishing operation 80km south of Beira.

By establishing a processing facility for crab and the means to harvest and deliver it to restaurants in South Africa, the two eccentric Americans had created a little pocket of previously unknown wealth for hundreds of Mozambicans who might otherwise be statistics for Oxfam, the World Bank and the US Agency for International Development.

Renamo president Afonso Dhlakama and his motley crew proclaim themselves advocates

of the free market, but they clearly have taken the word free rather too literally.

Bayoneting an innocent drunk to show they meant business, the raiders spent the night liberating the islanders of all their food, including 10 tons of just-delivered mealies, and other portable possessions.

A Dutch mechanic who was caretaking the plant while the Friedmans were on business in Maputo was forced to flee with other employees through a hail of bullets and sought shelter in a nearby mangrove swamp until the next morning.

Mr Friedman, heir to a West Virginia baking fortune, has spent most of his 58 years cutting deals in Washington and the Tex-

as oilfields. He is the very model of a Washington fixer, a trade he learnt as a private assistant to President Lyndon Johnson.

Mozambique caught his interest in 1986 when he hosted the then Foreign Minister, now President, Chissano, at the Georgetown Club. Mr Chissano, pitching for American investment, impressed him.

Along with a friend, Mr Harry Williams, the Friedmans formed a company, Harrill Seafood Inc, to go after Mozambique's prawns.

In March 1989 they set up shop in Maputo, fondly thinking they could start shipping in a matter of months. Mrs Friedman said: "We thought we'd be here six months to get a beachhead established."

Although they were adamant that there would be no bribes,

they sank over R1-million in lost time, legal fees and other expenses trying to get the necessary permits from Mozambique's stultifying bureaucracy.

Finally, after watching a parade of other would-be investors leave the country in angry despair, the Friedmans were close to calling it quits themselves when a local contact urged them to take a look at Chiloane.

The company purchased a Cessna Caravan — a single-engined turboprop aircraft designed to carry heavy payloads — and six months later the couple moved to the island to begin operations on a site granted to them by Sofala province.

Speaking little Portuguese and less N'dau, the local language, they set about hiring islanders to build an airstrip out of oyster

shells. Since then the makings of a full-blown fishing station have been flown in from Rand airport, Johannesburg, aboard the Cessna.

For the first time for years there is electricity, enabling a local entrepreneur to open a cinema using a television set and video recorder.

And there is money. Suddenly the island's two very basic shops have paying customers demanding new clothes and other consumer goods previously only available nine hours' boat journey away in Beira.

But, perhaps most important, the Friedmans have brought with them economic skills. Six months after their arrival their 100 or so full-time employees, all but a handful locally hired, are building

motorised 6m glass-fibre boats from the keel up, erecting modern steel-and-concrete workshops, and maintaining sophisticated equipment.

There is even a small market garden, set up with the help of Mr Lester Thring, Johannesburg's chief municipal horticulturist and now a regular visitor.

The Friedmans' initial plan was to buy prawns from local fishermen, put them on ice and fly them to South Africa. But there was a problem: the prawn population had been severely overfished by commercial trawlers and the locals in their dug-out canoes and "chatas" were finding it impossible to generate sufficient quantities.

Once again the couple refused to quit. There are plenty of crab, so Mr Friedman found a South

African distributor and flew in equipment to pasteurise and vacuum-pack the crabmeat on site.

After months of haggling with the Frelimo authorities, the Friedmans are now flying the crab out regularly to Rand airport. President Chissano has even ordered customs officers to be placed on Chiloane to expedite matters.

Then along comes Renamo to seize the spoils. The best that can be said for the rebels is that they left the plant sufficiently intact to continue generating proceeds for further plunder.

Relating their latest adventures on the phone from Maputo last week, the Friedmans still sounded game. The trouble for Mozambique is that most investors aren't quite as eccentric.