

Refugee tells of four lost years

A man who fled South Africa as a political refugee and ended up in a Frelimo prison as a "South African spy," described his ordeal this week following his release in South Africa.

Mr Sharif Shah Bilal (29), ex-Johannesburg hairdresser and karate expert, fled to Lesotho in September 1973.

He was working with organisations seeking to "improve the rights of dark-skinned people," he said.

After two "poverty-stricken" years in Lesotho, Mr Shah Bilal wrote to the Frelimo Government offering his services as a social worker.

Frelimo did not respond. So he decided to hitch-hike to Mozambique — via Swaziland.

In June last year he swam the Caledon River at Maseru, hitch-hiked across South Africa and entered Swaziland through the Usutu Forest.

With his United Nations refugee and Lesotho Christian Council documents, he presented himself to the Frelimo consulate in Swaziland, who gave him permission to enter Mozambique.

Mr Shah Bilal said African National Congress members approached him in Mozambique and asked him to join them. He refused.

He was then approached by Frelimo police agent Carlos Rocha — who was shot dead in Johannesburg in March last year — to work for the Mozambique secret police. He refused this offer too.

Mr Shah Bilal said he was arrested the same day (July 3 1975) by Rocha and spent 18 months in Cadeia civil prison. He said he saw black prisoners tortured and murdered. The main victims were Jehovah's Witnesses.

In November 1975 a South African diplomat paid him a surprise visit in prison to ask him if he would like to return to South Africa.

"On January 11 last year, Frelimo handed me over to the South African police at Komatipoort. I was kept in detention until May 16 when I appeared in Barberton Regional Court."

He was found guilty of leaving the country illegally and sentenced to 12 months. He was released on parole on Christmas Eve.

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