

SA divers held at gunpoint off Maputo

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TWELVE South Africans, including two small children, are being held at gunpoint by Frelimo soldiers on allegations of plundering a shipwreck off Maputo.

The South Africans, all divers from the Transvaal Underwater Research Group, were arrested four days ago by a Frelimo gunboat in Mozambique and marched to jail on Inhaca Island, 25km offshore from Maputo after soldiers claimed they had "stolen treasure" from a sunken ship.

But the divers, who are sportsmen not salvagers, say all they took from the wreck were coldrink bottles.

The prisoners, who include a two-year-old baby, are under armed guard on board the Richards Bay-registered yacht *Corolita*. The situation is poised

for a diplomatic row which could chill thawing relations between Mozambique and South Africa.

Those held by Frelimo are skipper Allen Ubsdell, his wife Michelle and son Barry, 2; Neal and Vivian Harvey and their son Ryan, 8; Allan and Vicky Stewart; Michael and Richard Bailey; and Craig and Brent Scott. All are from Johannesburg.

In a ship-to-shore radio interview with Weekend Argus yesterday — one of the group's first links with "home" — Mr Michael Bailey said they were "fed up" with the apparent impotence of authorities to intervene in what they called virtual piracy.

"We have been held prisoners on board for four days over a few Coke bottle replicas," he said. "They are worthless; I would have thrown them overboard if I had known what has-

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sles we would go through.

"We are now getting cabin fever, getting on each other's nerves and running out of fresh water. Frelimo has offered us nothing."

According to Mr Bailey, they were boarded at gunpoint on January 8 by soldiers shouting at them in Portuguese.

"We had been diving off a wreck (apparently called the *Danae*) near Inhaca Island and all we had salvaged were those bottles. We are sports divers and are only here for fun. It's our annual holiday."

"We were herded at gunpoint to the jail on Inhaca, even little Barry. Finally, we were re-

leased, but Allen (the skipper) and another crew member, Craig Scott, were locked up for the night to make sure we didn't try to escape.

"The next day a gunboat arrived to escort us to Maputo. Allen and Neal were allowed on the yacht to sail her to Maputo, but we were marched aboard this rust bucket.

"Eventually we moored in Maputo harbour and were placed under arrest on the boat. We got a message through on our SSB radio to South Africa and a Foreign Affairs representative came on board. They have been doing their best, but to no avail."

Mr Rick Bailey, father of Michael and Richard, said he had

been phoned on Friday about his sons' plight.

"Both boys are competent so we are not unduly worried. We're just grateful they got a message through to us."

A spokesman for Foreign Affairs yesterday said they were lobbying for the group's release. It was being handled by their representative in Maputo who could not be contacted for comment yesterday.

A member of the Zululand Yacht Club at Richards Bay, where the *Corolita* is registered, said the club was "amazed" the vessel had been impounded.

"They were sports divers and I cannot believe they would have plundered any wrecks as Frelimo claimed."