

'How I bought two boys — for ^{WMail} 16-22/11 only R200 each' ₉₀

I BOUGHT two slaves on Wednesday: Jorge Mthembu (17) and his friend, Immanuel Kambule (18). The price was R200 each.

They are among hundreds of young Mozambicans — rendered desperate by that country's civil war — who are being brought into the country with the promise that they will be given a job.

They were not: they were sold to me with the sole condition that I pay hard cash for them. They are now at my mercy: if they refuse to work, demand pay or threaten to run away I can call the police and have them arrested as illegals and deported.

Many young boys and girls are fetched from Mozambique and sold by their guides every week. The network is big but traders do their operations semi-underground.

You have to be introduced to the handlers or win a guide's confidence before you become a prospective buyer.

The regular buyers include a white farmer who grows tobacco in Barberton, businessmen from Reef townships and around kaNgwane and individuals who want to keep young girls as wives.

My purchase began in the nondescript Block C village in kaNgwane's Inkomati district, which looks like an ordinary refugee settlement camp. Behind the wooden huts a heartless child slave trade goes on every day.

After doing a few rounds of the village this week I pulled off the road to ask one old man where I could buy youths to work in my businesses in the Reef.

I introduced myself as Mahlangu, a businessman from Benoni, to one of the chief handlers in Block C known as Baba (father) Thobela.

Thobela lives in a small wooden hut plastered with mud and I found the "veteran" dealer seated outside with about four men drinking home-brewed beer.

At first the men were suspicious seeing the white *Weekly Mail* car parked outside, apparently because police often use white cars.

After the men had calmed down, Thobela called me to his room where we discussed the purchasing of his "stock".

"I am out of stock presently but I will be leaving for Maputo tomorrow and I

Mozambican youths, desperate to escape the war-torn country, have two choices — slavery or starvation. Many choose slavery. **PHIL MOLEFE** describes how he 'purchased' his 'stock'

can bring you the stuff you want," said Thobela.

"And how much do you sell them for?" I asked. "R200 a head," replied Thobela.

I told him I was very desperate and he assured me he would get something ready for me in a week.

I went back to his home early the next day and said I could not go back to Benoni without at least two slaves because I was eager to start doing a lasting business with him.

I persuaded him to scrape around because I had already established that slave traders do not keep their "stock" in their homes.

When the children arrive on the South African side, handlers send them to various places around the village where they are kept until they are sold.

So Thobela relented and we drove to another village where he left me to wait for some time, and later returned with the two boys I bought from him.

Once the deal was clinched, Thobela instructed the boys to fetch their clothes and go with me.

No payment or type of job was discussed. The boys were willing to go because Thobela had given the order and they said they were desperate to find jobs.

Thobela did not ask for my particulars in case something happens to the boys, except for my telephone number in the event I wanted more supply. He even forgot to write the telephone number after I had paid him the money.

I, for that matter, could be anyone, from a ritual killer to someone who scouts around for girls to be used in city hotels as prostitutes.

Some of the dealers I spoke to said they were afraid to sell to just anyone because some of the children have disappeared without trace and it was suspected they could have been used for



Jorge Mthembu (17) is desperate for work. He was bought for R200 but he didn't know he'd been sold

Picture: JUSTIN SHOLK

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In other cases, young girls who refused to be sold to local men as wives were reported to have been taken to the bush — and it was not known what happened to them.

As I was driving back to Johannesburg, the boys told me that they did not know they had been sold to me. However, Kambule said he suspected something was happening when he saw me give Thobela "brown papers".

"We jumped into the car when Baba (Thobela) ordered us to do so because we are desperately looking for jobs," said Mthembu.

The boys innocently sat in the car and had no suspicions about who I was. They told me their only concern was to get jobs.

Apart from Thobela, I met another "big dealer" in Block C: Patrick Themba, who told me he preferred to fetch girls aged from 14 to 20 and to sell them

to local men to keep as wives.

Themba, who lives in a big yard with many small huts surrounding his house, also deals in boys aged 16 years and upwards. He said most of these he sold to a white farmer in Baberton. I struggled for five days to purchase slaves from Themba because he claimed to be "out of stock". Then I came to hear about Thobela.

I also visited Josea Sibuya's house after receiving information that he kept many women at his house and had sold others in the Reef townships of Thokozza, Daveyton, Tembisa, Soweto and Vereeniging. Sibuya has been missing from his house since one of his captives, Jabulile Masuku, was admitted to hospital after she was assaulted by a man to whom she had been sold.

The dealers bribe their way in and out of Mozambique and use taxis and walk long distances to fetch their "stock".

"When we are in Mozambique we do

not use cars because of the war going on there — soldiers can hear us coming from a distance," explained Thobela.

The dealers usually pick up a group of 15 to 20 and then split them up into smaller groups of three.

"When there is more fighting going on we usually walk at night and then hide in the bush in the day so it takes up to a week to come back with the kids," said Thobela.

Most of the children are picked up in villages which have been ravaged by the civil war, with either the father killed in the battle or the mother taken away by rebel Renamo soldiers.

These children are then promised they will be offered jobs and accommodation once in South Africa.

My two "slaves" told me it was difficult to resist the temptation of escaping to a safer country with promising prospects for jobs.