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SALYM FAYAD

LAST year business was slow," says James while he crosses the bridge from Beitbridge to Musina, "but it picked up when the government said they were going to deport Zimbabweans without papers".

James is one of the "runners" who operate at the South African border post with Zimbabwe. "Before we only helped people cross into South Africa, but now many Zimbabweans are going back home because they don't want to be deported or because they are scared of the xenophobia. That's good for us."

The service the runners provide is to make all the formalities "faster and cheaper" for the migrants. James lives in Beitbridge, on the Zimbabwean side of the border, but everyday he crosses to the South African side to work, even if he does not have a passport. "Everyone knows me here, and we have contacts in the immigration offices on both sides. They get a percentage of what we charge and they stamp the passports, issue the visas and clear the vehicles for us."

Friday afternoon is a busy time at the border post and under his arm James holds a thick folder with passports, ID books, vehicle registrations, photocopies and R50 notes.

In the parking lot a dozen minibuses and a few 4x4s wait in line for their runner to come back with their documents.

The police clearance to cross a car into Zimbabwe costs almost R500 (\$69), but James can do it for R300 (\$41) in only 15 minutes. To clear a minibus loaded with goods to sell in Zimbabwe could be anything

'He looks like a busy entrepreneur, holding a notebook where he registers the names of the passengers ...'

from R1 000 (\$138) to R10 000 (\$1 379): "It depends; it's not the same if you are importing socks or washing machines".

When people want to cross back to Zimbabwe and they do not have a passport, the runners can get them across for only R100 (\$14), "but to go to South Africa from Zim... ah, that's different. It's more expensive, and you have to go to the *omalayitsha*."

I meet one of them at the taxi rank in Beitbridge, a dusty and chaotic gathering of hooting minibuses, street vendors and passengers waiting for their boarding time.

"I am an *omalayitsha*, a transporter," says Savusa. "I carry people and things to and from South Africa."

BEITBRIDGE: Where business is boss

Illegal migration boosts informal economy at the Zimbabwe-South Africa border

He looks like a busy entrepreneur, holding a notebook where he registers the names of the passengers that come to book a seat in his taxi.

"For R500 (\$69) each I take them from Beitbridge all the way to Joburg. I have to negotiate the border. So with that money, I pay the police and the petrol. It also includes the toll gates."

Without any sign of irony, he believes the transporters provide a social service by helping fellow countrymen in need to move to greener pastures. "People need to go to South Africa to earn more money than in Zimbabwe, but if they don't have a passport we help our brothers to get there without being arrested."

According to a Zimbabwean cross-border trader that goes shopping to Musina every week, most of the clothes sold in the largest markets of Harare and Bulawayo come from the Indian and Ethiopian retailers in Musina.

While the trader loads a dozen sacks of clothes on the *omalayitsha's* truck, she tells me that besides paying a price per sack, all the passengers must hand their purchase receipts to the transporter. "He claims the refund for the import tax at the border and keeps it for himself," she says.

For migrants without documents arriving in Beitbridge, there is an alternative



CROSSING OVER: Nothing is sacred at the border post. Everything, from people to goods, is taken over at a price

way of crossing to South Africa. In the complex dynamics of the border, the *guma-guma* are in charge of getting people across the crocodile-infested Limpopo River, and are responsible for a large number of human rights abuses.

Pastor, a *guma-guma* from Beitbridge, talks carelessly about the way he and his colleagues operate.

"We start charging R500 (\$69) per person to take them to the other side, but when people don't have the money — or

pretend they don't — we take everything (they have)".

Pastor was once a border-jumper himself and knows that people who are crossing this way for the second or third time carry very little money. In those cases "we rape the women in payment," he says bluntly.

In 2010, Médecins Sans Frontières registered almost 250 rapes, but most of the actual cases are not reported by the victims for fear of being deported.

Pastor's gang takes groups of

20 to 40 people to South Africa once or twice a week, and they distribute the earnings between the nine gang members. However, he complains that many times this money is not enough because there are some expenses that need to be covered. "We have to pay the smugglers to use their holes."

The fence that runs along the South African side of the river has been violated in numerous places allowing the transit of illegal immigrants and smuggled merchandise,

especially cigarettes. Despite the presence of the South African army patrolling the border, the mafia of the cigarette smugglers manages to get across an estimated 20% of the tobacco consumed in South Africa, according to the Tobacco Institute of Southern Africa.

Like at a toll gate, they also collect a fee from the *guma-gumas* who bring migrants through the places where the fence has been broken. Most of the cigarettes are transported to a farm

somewhere in Mpumalanga, where the smuggled Zimbabwean cigarettes are repacked in South African cigarette packets.

That is how a R7 packet of Remington Gold in Beitbridge becomes a R30 packet of Stuyvesant Red in Johannesburg.

Pauline, a 35-year-old Zimbabwean, illegal immigrant and mother of two, worked as a domestic worker for two years in Johannesburg. Afraid of deportation, in late 2010 she started making her

way back home when she encountered one of the irregular activities that Musina offers as job opportunities.

"We charge R50 (\$7) for the 'short time'," she says in a soft voice. "For the whole night it is R250 (\$34.50). But if the client doesn't want to use a condom, it's double: R100 (\$14) for short time and R500 (\$69) for full time."

According to Pauline, many people don't believe HIV exists, "because you can't see the signs of a sick person" and some don't care because they are already infected.

As with the *guma-gumas* and the smugglers, the presence of sex workers is relatively tolerated by the authorities. "Some nights the police come to arrest us. They say it's because we are bitching, but they just want to f**k. So they take us to the station and we f**k and they let us go in the morning. But they never pay."

Many deported kids at the centre are under much needed counselling for psychological shock and traumas

at a Safe Zone for deported minors on the Zimbabwean side. For Nkomo, the migration of young men will not be influenced by Zimbabwe's economic recovery or a change of government — it is rather fuelled by a combination of the media and the misleading testimonies of young migrants.

Many deported kids at the centre are under much needed counselling for psychological shock and traumas experienced during the process of crossing the border.

The files of social workers are full of horror stories of minors that have been beaten up by the police; gang-raped by the *guma-guma* or forced to have sex with their own mothers or sisters.

Many others made it to Joburg but never got a job, had to sleep on the street and were eventually arrested and deported.

More than a lawless no-man's land, as borders are usually referred to, Musina is more like an all-man's land where different social groups try to make a living through the exploitation of others, a dynamic place where they all interact in a network with its own laws.

* Some names in this text have been changed to protect the identity of the sources.

* This text was written with the support of the Taco Kuiper Fund for Investigative Journalism.

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