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Beitbridge, South Africa, August 2011

The bubbly bus host was in high spirit. His radiant smile as he welcomed us on the bus lightened his clean uniform of a navy blue shirt with an orange trim on the shoulders. We seemed to be in good hands. And my fellow passengers did not disappoint. Everyone was excited. Some people were doing last minute shopping, thanks to the vendors who managed to sneak onto the bus that morning. People bought lollipops, phone chargers and toys. The luggage compartments and trailer were full. My seat-mate tried to bring her suitcase inside the bus. I feared for my legroom. I was against the idea but I decided not to speak out lest the rest of the passengers take me for a snob. But the friendly bus assistant stood his ground and asked her to take it out and put it in the under body baggage compartment. I thanked him in my heart.

As we left Park Station, my seat-mate was quiet, busy fidgeting with her phone. It was a young man sitting across the aisle who was promising to be the life of the journey. He was all giggly and could not stop talking about his good boss. He talked about the boss and his generosity. The white boss gave him a stove and a sawing machine. He said he would sell the old stove. I hoped it was still in good condition, worth the transportation cost. He would give the sawing machine to his younger brother to start a furniture business. His younger brother was not strong enough to do the hard work in *Joni*, slang for Johannesburg, but often in reference to the whole of South Africa. He said he had asked his mother to come with all his siblings to welcome him at the bus depot.

"I told her to hire a minibus and bring strong young men because I have a lot of luggage. You will see it when we reach Blantyre," the young man continued to share unsolicited information.

The irony of life. As he was excited and talked about meeting his mother warmly, I was thinking about my mother, whose tombstone unveiling ceremony I was going to attend. I was lost in a world of my own, far removed from all the chitchat.

Around 3pm we approached Beitbridge, the bus host announced we were approaching the border post. He appeared in full control as he coached us on how to conduct ourselves to be assisted quickly at the immigration check. All passengers, when asked to, should leave the bus and queue at the immigration office. Those who overstayed, or "*amavuto"* (with problems) as he put it, had to pay. The bus host did not say it but we all knew the payments were not fines or anything official. They were bribes because the immigration services are offered for free at all the borders on the route. The bribes would "speed up" the processes, he said.

The bus host put those that overstayed their visas in three categories. First were those using "*mapepala*" or emergency travel documents. They had to pay R50 each. Second were those using old passports which had been phased out by the Malawi government. They would pay R100. Lastly, those with new passports would pay R300. The bribes seemed to be determined based on how difficult the documents were to be replaced. All passengers falling in those

three categories were asked to remain on the bus. He would collect the documents and money for each category separately.

When we got to the border post those of us with valid visas went to the immigration office. The bus host then collected the travel documents, accompanied with R50 for each. He did not care to count the total, trusting everyone was honest. He was shocked when the immigration officer he approached told him the money was insufficient for the number of documents presented. The immigration officer suspected the bus host took some of the money. The host protested his innocence. The officer and the host failed to agree. The officer returned the money and documents. He refused to assist the passengers. The host, disgraced and angry, returned to the bus and asked the concerned passengers. A couple travelling with a toddler confessed to have put R50 for all three instead of R150. They said they had been by friends in Johannesburg "the fee" was R20 for each document. The couple angered not only the bus host but also the other migrants who were hoping to be assisted. All the passengers in that group received 30-day visitors' visas on their entry into South Africa but ended up residing and working in the country for longer. They formed part of the population that is known as undocumented migrants. There were over 10 undocumented migrants on the bus. The rest were residents, traders and visitors with valid visas.

The bus host tried to keep calm but he was overcome by emotion. He shouted at us for being ungrateful. He was only trying to help, he said.

"The problem with *anthu otchona* is they think 'the fees' are still the same as the last they travelled. The fees have gone up, man," chipped in one of the passengers. Obviously a trader and frequent traveller.

Amtchona is a derogatory term for migrants who take a long time without returning or visiting home. The loud passenger left his seat and stood in the corridor next to the bus host.

The young man sitting across us was silent. He was using the old passport so he was among those waiting to be assisted by the host.

"Some people think I am a fool and they are clever. They think I want to eat their money, but I am only helping," the bus host continued, almost shouting, as if aiming for all passengers to hear.

He returned the travel documents to the respective passengers. He vowed never to assist the passengers "with problems". The undocumented migrants were supposed to go to the immigration office where they were likely to be declared undesirable people and banned from returning to South Africa for a certain period. The country's new immigration regulations stipulate that visitors who overstay by less than 30 days be banned for a period of 12 months. If a person overstays for the second time within a period of 24 months they are declared undesirable for two years. A person who overstays by more than 30 days is banned for a five-year period.

The bus host warned the undocumented migrants the process would take a long time. The migrants we advised to get off the bus and 'jump the border'. They joined us on the Zimbabwean side of the border.

I got worried. If that was the experience at the first border post, the 1,700-kilometre trip was going to be tedious. We still had to go through Zimbabwe and Mozambique to get to Malawi – a total of six border posts.

As we left Beitbridge, I had many questions. How would the undocumented migrants cross the rest of the borders? How would they return to South Africa with their impaired records? Who determined the bribes? Was the bus host going to get a cut?

Mixed fortunes

For over 10 years I lived in the populous Ndirande Township in the commercial city of Blantyre in southern Malawi. In Matope area, a good number of families relied on support from family members living in South Africa. Several men from the area, both young and old, worked in South Africa. Of late, young women, too, have joined the trend in migrating to *Joni*; some follow their husbands while others seek work.

Families with relations based in South Africa were self-evident. On Saturdays they would hang their thick fluffy blankets from *Joni*. A few better-off would add shiny satin bedspreads on their drying lines. Most of them lived in white-washed, modest houses that stood out from the neighbourhood. Their lounges were furnished with couches and fridges from South Africa.

Most households whose men were working in South Africa lived comfortably. However, one particular family stood out for their poverty despite their father being *ku Joni*. They rented a two-roomed, mudbrick house, roofed with rusty iron sheets. The walls wore down with every rainy season. The mother sold samosas and small packets of charcoal to support her four children. During the rainy season, she used to collect sand from nearby streams and sell to people who were building in the area. Rumour had it her husband left her pregnant with their last born. The girl is now in her early 20s. The husband never returned.

There were so many stories, told by neighbours and friends, of the migrants' and their families' experiences. The stories were often so exaggerated it was difficult to differentiate fact from fiction. One of the stories was about a father who was said to have married again in South Africa. It was speculated that once the unsuspecting wife went to visit him and he lied to his second wife that the first wife was his sister. The first wife could not bear the pain of pretending that her husband was her brother. She returned home and her husband continued to send her financial support.

At Nachiye Village in the hilly Ntcheu district where my mother came from, several men migrated too. My grandfather, among others, moved to Zimbabwe where he married and settled. Two of my mother's cousins made their fortune in South Africa in the early 1970s and 1980s. One of them died just after constructing a beautiful house in the village. The family suspected he had been bewitched because he had become successful. The last time I visited the village the house was in ruins; the roof was blown away and the walls were falling. No one moved into the house for fear of being bewitched.

My grandfather and uncles were part of an old migration movement. For over hundred years, Malawian men have been working in the mines and other industries in South Africa. In 1984, author Robert Boeder wrote about the history of labour migration in a journal article titled 'Malawian Labour Migration and International Relations in Southern Africa'. I read his article to get some insights. According to the article, the first Malawians in South Africa were four slaves who worked as servants for Universities' Mission to Central Africa (UMCA) missionaries in the 1860s. Then more Malawians started trickling in to work in diamond and gold mines. Other migrants worked in Zimbabwe and Zambia, then known as Southern and

Northern Rhodesia. The three countries, Malawi – then known as Nyasaland, Zimbabwe and Zambia, were colonised by Britain and later in 1953 formed a federation. Between the 1930s and 1940s, South Africa competed with Rhodesia for Malawi labour. As the federation crumbled in the late 1950s, migration to Rhodesia declined while that to South Africa increased.

Malawi's first independent president, Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda is one of the migrants that worked in the mines. Journalist Tim Walker wrote an obituary about the first president of Malawi, Hastings Kamuzu Banda in 1997, which was published by South Africa's *Mail & Guardian*. Walker wrote about how Banda, as a teenager, left Malawi and walked to South Africa where he worked as a clerk in a mining company in Boksburg, Johannesburg in 1918. While working, he continued with his studies. He studied in the evenings. He later left the country to study medicine overseas.

While Banda was overseas, migration between Malawi and South Africa intensified with the introduction of organised labour recruitment. In the early 1900s, men were recruited through the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (WNLA, popularly known in Malawi as *Wenela*) and later The Employment Bureau of Africa (TEBA) to work in South African mines.

After over 40 years, Banda returned to Malawi a qualified medical doctor and politician. He became prime minister in 1963 and president in 1964. Under his leadership, Malawi enjoyed good diplomatic relations with South Africa. Banda was known as the "odd man out" among fellow African nationalists for working with an apartheid government. His ties with the South African government were strengthened in 1971 when Banda became the first head of state from an independent African country to address a gathering in the South Africa.

With Banda's return and the good relations, the migration peaked. It is not surprising then that between 1972 and 1974, Malawi was the highest supplier of labour in the mines. Thereafter, the numbers kept fluctuating due to policy changes. The organised labour recruitment ended 1988 when the South African authorities demanded that potential recruits must be screened for HIV and the Malawi government refused, according to two journal articles written by historian Wiseman Chijere Chirwa. That the end of organised labour recruitment but migration of low skilled Malawians continues. Unlike the miners, these days the low skilled migrants are not protected by law. They do not qualify for residence and work visas and that makes their stay and journeys difficult because they lack legal protection.

Migration between Malawi and South Africa has not always been southwards. In the early 19th century two groups led by Zwangendaba Jele and Ngwane Maseko left the Zululand amid tribal wars in search of refuge. They trekked north and settled in two districts in Malawi. The group led by Jele settled in Mzimba district in the Northern Region and that led by Maseko settled in Ntcheu, in the Central Region. In Malawi, they are both known as Ngonis. The Ngonis are the third largest tribe forming about 13 percent of the population, according to the 2010 Malawi Demographic and Health Survey.

My uncles, who worked in South Africa, were from the Maseko Ngonis. Perhaps their ties to South Africa are what inspired them to come and work in South Africa. Unfortunately, they are not alive to answer the questions. But some studies have shown similar patterns.

Sociologist Jens Andersson conducted research in Malawi between April 2004 and March 2006 and found migration from Mzimba district preceded the organised recruitment regime. He also found the district is one of the major source of undocumented migrants. His findings seem to be supported by the current transport patterns. Bus companies that operate between Malawi and South Africa have introduced direct services from Mzimba. Apart from the major cities of Blantyre and Lilongwe, the only other district with direct bus services is Mangochi, in the Eastern Region.

The departure

It rained lightly on that Sunday morning. But it was getting bright and promising to be a hot day. A friend gave me a lift to the filling station at Old Kandodo Corner Shop in Blantyre CBD, where I was going to take an Intercape bus. Intercape was my first choice, and still is, among the several bus companies plying between Malawi and South Africa. Its services are regular and the buses are comfortable and well air-conditioned. Its fares are slightly higher though than the rest of the bus services.

It was not my first time travelling to South Africa. I first travelled to South Africa in February 2008 when I was 25 to study for one year. The first trip was a two-hour flight from Blantyre to Johannesburg and another two hours from Johannesburg to Port Elizabeth. I have taken a couple of flights since then but I find them less adventurous compared to the bus trips. Flights are quite predictable and less eventful. People check in and get engrossed in their newspapers, novels and gadgets while waiting to board. The few noble ones greet their neighbours as they sit. The flights are short and quiet, unless there are some noisy passengers. You reach the destination, disembark and after checking out, everyone grabs their luggage from the carousels and off they go. Flights are fast and comfortable but cost more. It costs about R3,000 to fly from Blantyre to Johannesburg. A bus ticket only costs about R900.

Since 2008 I have taken eight bus trips between Malawi and South Africa. But my departure in January 2011 was very significant. I was going to stay in Johannesburg, where I had never lived before. I was going to join my husband, Zondani, who works as an architect. I met Zondani in the early 2000s in college in Malawi. We became friends after finishing our studies and started dating in 2009. We got married in December 2010. We agreed that I would join him immediately after the wedding.

That Sunday morning was a day of mixed emotions for me. I was excited at the thought of starting a new life as a married person in a bigger city but at the same time sad to be leaving my family, especially my younger brother and sister. We are five in my family – three boys and two girls. Since the death of our parents in the early 2000s, I had been staying with my younger brother and sister. I was particularly worried about the youngest, my sister. She had just finished her final year in high school and I did not know where she would stay.

At Kandodo Corner Shop I found the bus, emblazoned in feminine colours of yellow, pink and purple, ready. A few passengers were already on the bus. Several were outside either packing their luggage in the compartments or chatting with the people who came to see them off. I showed my ticket to the bus staff that stood by the door. They asked if I had a travel allowance and a proof of purchase.

To enter South Africa Malawian visitors are required to have a valid passport and travel allowance of at least R3,000. At the point of entry, they are granted a 30-day visitors' visa. Those intending to reside, study or work must obtain a visa from the South African High Commission before travelling.

I chose a window seat in the middle of the bus. I always avoid the back seats because as the journey progresses the toilet can get smelly. The seats were comfortable with sufficient leg room. Anyway, a petite person like me does not require too much space. My family and friends hung around until the bus started off to wave me goodbye.

The short bus host, neatly dressed in his uniform, brought in piles of food packages and drinks. He went back to the small office behind the Old Kandodo building to finalise his paperwork. He returned to the bus carrying some papers and we started off. The host took the microphone and welcomed us. He introduced himself and the two bus drivers. He talked about the bus features; how to use the airvents and reading lights. The toilet on the bus was only for urine, he emphasised. The bus drivers would stop if and when a passenger needed to use a toilet outside. No smoking was allowed on the bus. He made the announcement in English and repeated in Chichewa, arguably Malawi's most common language. The host asked for a volunteer to pray. There was one passenger wearing a pastor's collar. I thought he would offer to pray but he didn't. An elderly woman from the back prayed, asking God for travelling mercies.

We started off at exactly 8am as scheduled. The bus was almost silent, except for the promotional and comic videos that played on the bus's small screens. It was as if everybody was engrossed with the thoughts of what they were leaving behind and the anxiety of what lay ahead. It was going to be a two-day trip of listening to gospel music, interspaced with Nigerian movies. Some passengers appeared to enjoy the movies judging from their loud laughter.

We left Blantyre CBD and drove between the low density Kabula suburb and the populous Mbayani Township, a mocking display of the levels of inequality in the country. Mbayani is famous for its second-hand clothes market. The market along M1, Malawi's main road that links the three major cities of Blantyre, Lilongwe and Mzuzu, made headlines a couple of years earlier when vendors encroached the road pavements. After failing to move the vendors, the government opted to put speed humps and build a short wall along the road. Again, people complained that because of the speed humps the place became a hot spot for smash-and-grab thieves especially at night. Mbayani gives way to an equally populous township of Chemusa and then Chirimba. The three townships are part of the many that litter Blantyre accommodating many poor and middle income families. The United Nations estimated over 70 percent of Malawi's 15-million population were living on less than US$2 per day in 2010.

A few minutes after starting off, food was served: a cold drink and an option of either a beef burger or two slices of pizza. Some people kept their food but I chose to eat mine while it was still warm. That was the only meal I took until we got to South Africa. I had already trained myself to only have drinks and sweets to avoid putting myself under pressure and bathroom visits. I don't use the toilets on the buses. I usually only use the bathroom at Nyamapanda port of entry in Zimbabwe and then again at Beitbridge border in South Africa.

At Lunzu the driver slowed down to avoid the trucks and minibuses that were packed along the road at the busy trading centre. The scenery got greener as we exited Lunzu, thanks to the

young maize crop. The mango fruit as we drove through Lirangwe and Mdeka in rural Blantyre were inviting.

We arrived at Shire River, Malawi's longest, just before 9am. The 400-kilometre river was swelling with brown water, a testimony that it was raining up there in Zomba or Mangochi. The river, Lake Malawi's only outlet, marks the boundary between Blantyre and Mwanza districts. There is a police roadblock right at the end of the bridge. The makeshift market at the roadblock was already busy with vendors selling fresh produce, fried chips and meat, boiled eggs, and drinks of all sorts. It was getting hot outside and we could feel it on the bus. On the one side there were bags of charcoal confiscated by the police and a small pay public toilet. We stopped for a couple of minutes but we were not searched as is the routine with local buses.

The thought of leaving a district I had called home for almost all my life hit me. I wondered how life was going to be in South Africa. Two weeks earlier I had obtained a relatives' visa from the South African High Commission in Lilongwe and it clearly stated that I would not be allowed to work or study. All along I thought as a spouse of a resident I would get a work permit. But as I discovered I would only be granted a work permit after getting a job offer. The requirements would not be too stringent, I was told. But would it be easy to get a job without a work visa?

The go-betweens

At around 9:30am, we got to another police roadblock at Mwanza district. We stopped briefly. As the elderly bulky driver, dressed in a clean white uniform shirt, was talking to the police, two young men, looking very casual and with no luggage, hopped into the bus. They greeted and chatted with the bus drivers and host. They all appeared familiar with each other. I wondered who they were but I was soon to discover who they were.

The bus host announced we were approaching Mwanza border post to exit Malawi. He explained the procedure to be followed at the border. The announcement broke the silence on the bus. The bus host referred passengers who had no travel allowances or had forex but without a receipt to the two men we had picked up at the roadblock.

At Mwanza border post we found a lot of trucks parked on the side of the road. As we got off the bus we were greeted by vendors selling snacks, boiled eggs, airtime, curios, forex and other merchandise. The headache started there.

Passengers who were confident their documents were in order went to the big brick-face building on the right which houses the immigration and revenue services. Further right were ATMs and small agencies for banks and insurance companies. Further up the road was a big yard full of imported cars.

There were no guarantees. Even those with the valid passports, travel allowance and receipts were anxious. I recalled how once an opportunistic official tried his luck with me.

It was at that very same border in 2009. I was on my way to drop some of my late mother's belongings with her family in Zimbabwe. I went through the immigration check without problems only to have my passport withheld by one of the officers who checked us as we boarded the bus. I was not sure which government department he belonged to as he wore no uniform or tag.

"My crime?" I asked.

"Having an expired study permit in the passport."

I laughed out in disbelief. I explained to the officer I travelled to South Africa and returned within the permitted period in 2008. He kept quiet. I was shocked because I was so sure he knew that was not a problem. Not giving up, he picked another mistake. And he was lucky with that. He asked for a receipt for the R800 which I had. I showed him the stamp in my passport indicating where and when I acquired the forex. He was not satisfied; he insisted on a receipt. For that, he took my passport and added to the small pile of passports he had taken from other passengers. He returned to his office with the passports and left a young man, who came from nowhere, to complete his dirty work. The bus driver assured us we could use the man to negotiate with the officer. The man told all passengers whose passports had been withheld to pay R50 each.

“For what?” I asked.

I was told that was the only solution if I did not want to be left behind or delay the bus.

“Will we get receipts for the fine?” I asked.

“No,” I was told.

With pressure from the young man and fellow passengers, I paid the R50. And so did everyone whose passport was withheld. From that experience I learned there were no guarantees with the border checks. The officers can either try their luck or punish a passenger for the slightest anomaly.

That Sunday morning, I first went to the agricultural office located in a small building on the left side of the road to get certification for the rice and dry fish that I was carrying. From there I joined the queue at the immigration office where I was assisted quite speedily.

As advised by the host, passengers who either lacked travel allowance or receipts, remained on the bus. The two young men who we picked at Mwanza roadblock also stayed behind. The men advised the passengers on how much they had to pay depending on their issues. I was not sure how many people stayed but it was quite a good number. The go-betweens collected their passports and the money. They disappeared to the immigration office. They did a couple of back-and-forth taking and delivering messages between the passengers and the officers. After an hour or so, they returned with all the passports stamped.

Among those that went to the immigration office, a few had their passports withheld for a number of reasons. One was a woman using a South African passport. I shared a seat with her but only discovered she was a South African citizen then. She told me she was visiting her father’s family in the lakeshore district of Nkhata Bay. She overstayed during her previous visit and the immigration officer picked that. She insisted she paid the penalty then but the immigration officer demanded to see the receipt. Unfortunately, she did not have the receipt with her. She redeemed herself with a bribe of R100. The second woman, a trader, had more forex than she declared. She was detained. Several other passengers’ passports were withheld because their receipts were suspected to be forged. The two go-betweens came to their assistance.

After about half an hour of more negotiations through the go-betweens their passports were released. The business woman with excess forex was left behind. Some passengers were very angry and did not hide their irritation from the bus host and drivers. Intercape was the only service where the staff did not negotiate with border officers on behalf of such passengers, they claimed. That was the reason most traders and people without travel allowances avoid it, the passengers argued. Apparently, other bus services have connections and negotiate with border officials on passengers’ behalf. Other passengers were more sympathetic to the staff and faulted the business woman. She was foolish, they said. Clever traders, when carrying more forex than declared, ask the drivers to hide the money. Alternatively, they split the money into smaller amounts and ask fellow passengers to keep it for them.

We formed a queue outside the bus in that heat, waiting to be searched. In the queue I met a friend with whom I went to the University of Malawi. She was heavily pregnant and had a small boy. She was going to Cape Town where her husband was studying towards his PhD, she said. Two officers came and checked our passports. They searched our bags too. We spent some more minutes as some people were found carrying peanuts and beans without clearance from the agricultural office. They paid bribes of K1,000 each. The officers also checked if anyone was carrying excess Kwacha, the Malawi currency.

No traveller is allowed to leave Malawi with more than K6,000 (about R130), according to Immigration Department Spokesman, Joseph Chauwa.

As we left Mwanza, more people were talking to each other. I heard some sharing their experiences at the border. Others discussed what lay ahead.

I dread the stretch between Mwanza in Malawi and Nyamapanda in Zimbabwe because within a distance of less than 300 kilometres we endure four border controls as we exit Malawi, enter and exit Mozambique, and enter Zimbabwe.

The bribe hike

We drove through the 11-kilometre hilly stretch between Mwanza border in Malawi and Zobue border in Mozambique. Mwanza was tough, but passengers without the travel allowance and receipts were more worried about Zobue. We were only driving through Mozambique but at their borders, officers also check if each passenger has a valid passport and the minimum travel allowance required by South Africa's Department of Home Affairs. The officers ask for genuine receipts for the forex. They also check if each passenger ever overstayed in South Africa. Any passenger falling short on any of those items was in trouble.

The bus host took to the mic again and gave a set of instructions. At Zobue border all passengers were to remain on the bus until called to go and queue at the immigration office. After finishing at the immigration desk we were to sit on the two wooden benches under a tree on the side of the road and wait until everyone was done. We would then be called to queue by the bus where guards would check if all passengers had their passports stamped. The bus host emphasised that passengers should not buy forex from the vendors at the border post, or any other item. No passenger should stand near the Mozambican flag, he repeatedly announced. Standing next to the flag was a crime, he said. He distributed small immigration forms, which we were all supposed to complete, requesting the Mozambican immigration office for permission to travel through the country. The forms were quite simple. We had to fill in the bus registration number, name, passport number, addresses and purpose of visit. But it was interesting how several passengers struggled with the forms and had to be assisted.

Our bus parked right in front of the black gate. We all got off and queued by the border office, painted grey and navy blue at the bottom. The office, with posters written in Portuguese, had the immigration counter on one side and revenue service on the other. Despite being a Portuguese-speaking country, the officers spoke English and Chichewa. There was so much discipline one would be forgiven for thinking no corruption took place there. But no border is different; a bribe is the common language at all of them.

The passengers with irregularities were advised by the go-betweens to set aside R50 for the immigration officials and R20 for the guards. They were told to put the R50 for the officers inside their passports. The officers would know what the money was for and stamp the passports accordingly. Unfortunately, it appeared the guards had hiked 'their fee' as they refused to accept R20, demanding R50 for each passenger with an anomaly. The guards accepted either Rand or Kwacha.

When we arrived at Zobue there were two buses from Malawi in front of us. When we left both buses were still there. Apparently, they had too many passengers who had shortcomings and the bus staff were still negotiating to make sure all of them were allowed to proceed. Those buses could take an additional one or two days to reach Johannesburg, our bus host said.

I wondered what kind of work the undocumented migrants were going to do in South Africa. After staying for a couple of years in South Africa, I have observed a pattern between the migrants' areas of origin and the nature of their work. Many people from the Eastern Region,

especially Mangochi and Machinga districts, work as shop assistants in Johannesburg CBD and other Chinese shopping centres. One can easily tell from their Yao accent. A lot of people from the Northern Region, mostly Tumbuka-speaking from Mzimba district, do domestic jobs in Sandton and surrounding suburbs in Johannesburg.

We left Zobue border post after an hour or so. The two go-betweens were left there, waiting for buses going to Malawi for a lift or maybe more business. I wondered how much they made through their services. How do they share the money with the officers?

The R200 bribe

Mozambique was hot. The airvents proved too small to cool us. The only excitement was seeing the Zambezi River as we crossed the bridge at Tete. The architecture around Tete was not pleasant; a mixture of good solid houses and mud-huts. It only reminded me of the poor planning in our own townships of Mbayani and Ndirande. But Tete is developing at quite a fast pace. With every trip I take I notice new developments.

We had a random police check at Tete. One officer jumped onto the bus while his colleague was talking to the driver. He checked all passports. Most of the passengers with irregularities parted with R20 each.

Around 1pm we approached Cuchamano border post, still in the Tete Province, to exit Mozambique. The host did his duty again, reminding passengers not to patronise vendors and keep a distance from the national flag. Those with shortcomings were advised to keep R50 each handy as bribes would be expected.

As we queued outside the small office, the only border post on the entire journey with one entrance, one passenger was called aside by one of the security guards. They had seen him jumping the short wall surrounding the immigration office's veranda instead of walking around to the queue. After a brief discussion in broken Chichewa the man followed the guards behind the immigration office. It was a mistake, frequent travellers said. It would be easier and cheaper to negotiate outside than in private. Some passengers asked the bus host to follow the middle-aged man and assist him but the host said it was not his responsibility. Ten to 15 minutes later the man returned to the queue. He was asked to pay R200 or be detained, he said. He paid.

One by one, we faced the immigration officers. Successful passengers emerged from the office with smiles. Several had to return to fellow passengers seeking change to top up their bribes. They had tried their luck with R20 but officers insisted on R50.

Despite having similar rules, Cuchamano was a bit relaxed than Zobue. As we sat on the dusty pavement waiting for the rest of the passengers, people bought drinks and bottled water. Some of the regular travellers advised there was a good restaurant nearby offering *nsima* (pap) and chicken. A number of people went to get their early supper. Others opted to wait until we crossed the Zimbabwe border. They preferred the way the pap from that side was done. I stuck to my principle. No solids until I crossed Beitbridge.

The suspecting officers

There is a distance of about one kilometre between Cuchamano border control in Mozambique and Nyamapanda border post in Mashonaland East Province, Zimbabwe. The boundary is barricaded by a wire fence. On previous trips, passengers used to walk to Nyamapanda and get their passports checked. They would then freshen up, buy food and eat while waiting for the rest of the passengers. But, as I discovered, things had changed. The immigration officers from Nyamapanda had stopped assisting passengers as and when they came. They waited for all the passengers in a particular bus to arrive, then queue at once. Once they started processing, no passenger was allowed to visit the bathrooms. Out of curiosity I asked a fellow passenger why the change.

"They discovered that some passengers used to show the same forex to the officers when asked for proof they had a travel allowance. Once a passenger is checked, she or he would go to the toilet and lend the money to someone else," I was told.

Nyamapanda border officials can be intimidating. I recalled that on my way from South Africa to Malawi in 2008 one officer withheld my passport. He argued I had 'jumped the border' at Beitbridge. He took my passport and sent me outside the office. The bus host asked me to give the officer '*kangachepe'* (a bribe) so I could get my passport. I refused. I told the bus host I had no reason to 'jump the border' since I had a valid permit. I insisted that if the immigration officer gave me the passport I would show him the exit stamp from the South African immigration. Grudgingly the officer returned my passport and voila I found the stamp. It was on a different page from the stamps from other border posts.

After Cuchamano, we all walked to Nyamapanda to enter Zimbabwe. The bus was there but it was an opportunity to stretch our legs. At Nyamapanda, the queue moved faster than at all the previous border posts. I guessed passengers with shortcomings had familiarised themselves with the drill and the negotiations took relatively less time. They were advised to slip R50 notes in their passports so the officers would assist accordingly.

We were done with the immigration check within 45 minutes or so. But there was still one headache, a luggage check. At Nyamapanda all luggage must be taken out from the bus for searching. I wondered why since we were just in transit. But you don't ask officers such questions lest you attract their wrath. By 7pm we were done. I visited the bathroom and managed to brush my teeth. And off we left.

It was a matter of hours before we got to Harare, Zimbabwe's Capital City. It was dark and I could see security lights here and there. The bus briefly stopped over at a garage to refuel, giving passengers the last chance to get some fresh air for that day. We left Harare around 10pm with an announcement from the bus host advising passengers to close curtains as some bad people at times stone the buses. We would spend the rest of the night on the 580-kilometre stretch between Harare and Beitbridge border. At least the night marked a break from the Nigerian movies. Lights off. I was exhausted and slept for most of the night.

Crossing Limpopo

Around 5am we approached Beitbridge, the border that never sleeps, to exit Zimbabwe. The border post was visible from quite a distance, thanks to the floodlights. The border control is open for 24 hours and very busy. There were buses, minibuses, private cars, trucks, and pickups loaded to the brim; a sign of the high levels of trade and migration between South Africa and its neighbouring countries. There were queues inside the immigration office and a lot of people outside, some standing, others loitering.

As we were waiting for the bus host to do the paperwork and call us out, a blind man sang a sorrowful hymn at the bus door expecting alms. Sadly, I did not see anyone dropping anything in his cup. The place was too hot and humid for an early morning.

The border control was lined with a number of immigration counters. As we queued inside the office some people who we found outside tried to join the line but they were stopped. Only people from our bus were allowed on that queue. I wondered why.

We stayed there for close to one hour and crossed the Limpopo River to face the last border: Beitbridge, on the South African side. The river flows through South Africa, Zimbabwe, Botswana and Mozambique, where it feeds into the Indian Ocean. The river looked intimidating as if emphasising the demarcation between the two countries. It was unfathomable to imagine that some brave and desperate people reportedly swim across the river.

Entry to *Joni*

Beitbridge South African side, the largest border post for the entire trip, is spacious with more officers and security. As I got off the bus I overhead the host scaring some passengers. On his previous trip, 15 people were denied entry into South Africa. That was the reason the bus service emphasised all passengers must have valid passports and travel allowances. We first went through the immigration counter. I was impressed by the orderliness and the queue moved really fast. Once I finished with the immigration control I dashed to the bathroom, brushed my teeth and hurriedly freshened up.

I proceeded to the customs office. I declared the food that I was carrying, showed the certification and had my bag searched. After the customs, I joined three large women that sat down on the paved pavements while waiting for the others. The search was going well until one woman was held for not declaring her goods. She had a big bag full of traditional fabrics. She tried, without success, to convince the officers that the fabrics were not for sale. She said they were for her niece's wedding. The customs officer slapped her with a fine on top of the estimated duty. The three women I sat with were angry with the woman for delaying us. As we were waiting for the woman to sort out her issues, some passengers walked down the passage into South Africa to get breakfast, phone sim cards and airtime.

After the immigration and customs check, we all queued by the bus for the final search. Just when I thought it was all good and done with, we had another hiccup. A police officer came and picked two men from the queue. People started asking what the problem could be. One of the regular female passengers had an explanation. The police must have suspected them to be carrying more forex than what they declared.

"The police will conduct a body search; they will take off everything," explained the woman.

"But why did the police officer suspect them?" someone asked.

The business woman, who appeared very familiar with the route, said it was easy to pick them out.

"Two middle-aged men, wearing leather jackets, with no luggage and standing at the end of the queue. It's obvious they are going to Durban to buy [imported] cars."

The woman had another theory, in case those factors were not enough give-away.

"It's possible an officer who dealt with them before spotted them and sent a friend to pick them."

"Does it mean we will leave them here?" I asked.

"No ways, they will be released after bribing the officers."

About ten minutes later the two men returned to the bus. No one asked them questions.

We left Beitbridge for Johannesburg after 9am. All passengers made it. I wondered how the people without allowances and receipts went through the immigration check. Most passengers appeared relieved and relaxed. The excitement was almost palpable. Several passengers were on phone calls telling their families and friends they had entered South Africa.

The quality of the road stood out. Perhaps a testimony that a R350-billion-economy differed a great deal from Malawi's US$4.6-billion. The roads were the best among those in all the four countries we traversed.

Going back to Malawi

The corruption at the borders is so rampant some travellers think some of the payments are official. A hairstylist, who operates from one of the salons in Randburg, travelled to Malawi in July 2015. She was going home for the first time since migrating to South Africa in 2008. When I met her to ask about her experience she insisted the money she paid at Zobue in Mozambique was official. It was a fee for using the country's road, she said.

"The fee has always been there. The R50 fee is official and all passengers must pay," she said. I knew otherwise but I did not want to argue.

Having overstayed her 30-day visitor's visa by seven years, she knew it was not going to be easy travelling to Malawi and back to Johannesburg. But she was prepared, mentally and financially.

At Beitbridge South African side, she knew if she went through the immigration office she would be declared an undesirable visitor to South Africa. She opted to 'jump the border'. She was joined by another woman from the bus.

"How did you 'jump the border'?" I asked.

She laughed. "We did it. People do it all the time."

"With all the police officers around?"

"We did it," she said. "We were even faster than those that went through the immigration."

She and her newfound friend got off the bus and crossed on foot. They joined a group of Zimbabwean female traders. They offered to help the Zimbabwean traders with their bags so they could look authentic. The disguise did not work.

"A police officer spotted us," she said, laughing.

They paid him R100 each. The two women paid an extra R50 each to another police officer as they walked to the Zimbabwe side. On the Zimbabwe side, the immigration officer realised the two women skipped the South African immigration office. They sorted him out with R50 each and had their passports stamped.

"On the Zimbabwe side you can pay openly. Everyone knows," she said.

I spoke with the personal assistant to the Zimbabwean High Commissioner in South Africa about the corruption. Unfortunately, she could not give me a response on the record. And she said the High Commissioner was too busy to respond.

The two women paid R50 each at Nyamapanda border. They paid more in Mozambique. They paid R50 each to the immigration officers and R50 each to the guards at both

Cuchamano and Zobue. At Mwanza border she paid either K1,000 or K2,000. She could not remember clearly.

After spending a month in Malawi, the hairstylist decided to return to *Joni*. She knew she could not be allowed back in South Africa because she overstayed her previous visa. But she had a solution. Instead of renewing her passport she decided to apply for a new passport using another name.

"But I didn't change much. I used our clan name instead of the surname," she said, as if justifying her actions.

Malawian citizens do not have national identity documents. To prove her citizenship the hairstylist got a letter from her village headman, confirmed by traditional authority and district commissioner. The document was certified by a magistrate.

Armed with a new identity, she left her home in the lakeshore district of Mangochi for the immigration headquarters in Blantyre, a distance of close to 250 kilometres. She found a minibus driver with connections at the immigration office. When they got to Wenela Bus Depot in Blantyre, the minibus driver called a fixer otherwise known as *dobadoba* who took the hairstylist and other passengers who also wanted passports.

"He told me to go in the immigration offices, do everything: the interview, fingerprints but not pay. He said I should leave the office with my application form without paying and meet him outside," she said.

The hairstylist paid K73,000 for an express passport to the *dobadoba*. She paid an extra K12,000 to be shared between the *dobadoba* and the respective immigration officer. The hairstylist was asked to add K3,000 because she did not have a national identity card.

"The *dobadoba* said the immigration officer would know that I had changed names and it was not my first time applying for a passport."

The *dobadoba* told her all the citizens that were resident in the country in recent years got national identity cards. The *dobadoba* lied to her. The government, through an agency called National Registration Bureau, is in the process of introducing national identity documents but none have been issued yet, spokesman Norman Fulatira told me when I asked. The Bureau is planning to start issuing IDs in May 2016.

The *dobadoba* also overcharged the hairstylist for the passport. The passport fee is K48,500, K58,500 for urgent cases, which take five days, and K68,500 for express cases, which take two days.

The hairstylist and the other applicants left the immigration offices with the *dobadoba* and met the immigration officer at a restaurant in the Blantyre CBD. Apparently, he was off duty as he was attending a colleague's funeral.

"He was dressed in civilian clothes but I noticed the trouser was part of his uniform," she said.

They left their application forms with the *dobadoba* and the immigration officer. It was on a Friday. The minibus driver told her there was no need for her to return to Blantyre the following week to collect the passport. He would collect on her behalf. And he kept his word. The following Tuesday, he safely brought the passport.

With the new passport, she started off for South Africa. She boarded the bus from Mangochi via Blantyre and exited through Mwanza border. The new passport meant she was returning with a clean record but she still had to buy her way through the borders. At Mwanza Border, she paid K2,000 to the immigration officer and K1,000 to another officer who checked the passports as they boarded the bus.

"What for?" I asked.

"I don't know. The officer had a list and he put several passports aside," she said.

I asked if she had sufficient travel allowance. She said yes. And a receipt for it? She said yes, but it was forged. I suspected that was the reason the officer made her pay. She kept some of her Rands and used them as travel allowance. She found it expensive to sell her forex and buy again.

At Zobue border, she paid R50. She claimed all the passengers paid.

"Whether your passport was good or bad, you had to pay. There, it is official. It is not a bribe," she swore.

I asked the First Secretary at the Mozambican High Commission, Amilcar de Sousa in Pretoria about this claim. But the promised response did not arrive on time despite several reminders.

She and other "passengers with problems" paid an extra R50 to the guards as they boarded the bus. At Cuchamano she paid R50 to the immigration officer and R50 to the guard. At Nyamapanda she paid R50. At Beitbridge on the Zimbabwe side she "passed for free". At the final border, Beitbridge South African side, the driver came up with a plan. He asked all passengers to contribute R30 each to speed up the process because the bus was late.

The corruption seems well organised and the bribes standardised. Are senior officers aware of the bribes that undocumented migrants pay? I wondered to myself.

The Malawi Consulate is the office responsible for the welfare of Malawians living in South Africa. I met the Consul General, Fraser Nihorya, a former Member of Parliament and former deputy Finance Minister, at his office in Sunninghill in Johannesburg. He said his office has been receiving complaints that undocumented migrants are asked to pay for services that are supposed to be rendered for free.

“Officers take advantage of the person because they know they have already broken the law and will agree to their demands,” said Nihorya. He suspected bus drivers and assistants have also established some clandestine business and it is not clear how much they pocket and how much they give to border officers.

Officers from the consulate have been on fact-finding trips before and filed reports to their head office, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They are planning on another fact-finding trip, the Consul General said.

In search for better pay

The hairstylist paid about R300 at the borders from Malawi to South Africa. She was a bit lucky, some migrants pay as much as an equivalent of their bus fare for bribes.

In 2015 I met a young Malawian woman, in her early 20s. She was working as a house help in one of the suburbs in Johannesburg north. She came to Johannesburg in April 2015. The single mother, faced with the responsibility of taking care of her son, ageing mother, nieces and nephews, decided to leave her home district of Balaka and move to Johannesburg where the prospects of better paying domestic jobs were high. She had never worked in Malawi.

"In Malawi, salaries are low. For domestic jobs, you can get paid K7,000 (about R150) per month. If lucky you get K10,000," she said. She currently earns R1,600 a month.

Her salary is about four times higher than the minimum wage in Malawi, which is K18,000 (about R400).

At R1,600, the house help is earning slightly more than some entry level civil servants. Entry-level police officers, nurses and teachers, who hold the Malawi School Certificate of Education, earn K760,104 (about R17,000) per year, Rudo Kayira, spokesman for the Department of Human Resource Management and Development told me.

The young woman used her mother's savings to get a passport and for bus fare. The Malawi passport has been getting pricier. Between 2006 and 2014, the passport fee increased twelvefold from K4,000 to K48,500.

She paid K50,000 when she bought her bus ticket. She was told the bus fare was K25,000 and the extra K25,000 was for assistance at the borders and bribes to officers. The bus service organised a travel allowance of R3,000 and a proof of purchase for her to show at all the borders.

"They lend me the money and I returned it after crossing Beitbridge," she said.

"So how was it when you faced immigration officers?"

"I never faced the officers. When we got to the border, the bus host asked me to remain on the bus. He took my passport and got it stamped for me," she said. The bus host did that at all the border posts except at Beitbridge South Africa side where she went through the immigration desk.

The numbers

Once we entered South Africa I could not sleep. I was fascinated by the natural and architectural beauty of the country. I could be forgiven for the fascination. I was coming from a city where the biggest highway had two lanes on each side. I remembered the first time that we drove under the Hendrik Verwoerd Tunnels between the towns of Messina and Louis Trichardt and the butterflies in my tummy.

We stopped at a garage at Messina where we had a chance to buy food. I had my first meal, a pie and cup of rooibos.

We drove through Limpopo. I was exhausted and kept dozing off. I woke up as we approached Midrand in Johannesburg where some people asked to be dropped off at a garage. One of the bus drivers also had to deliver a parcel. The driver had told almost all the passengers about the parcel. The package, well-concealed in a brown envelope, was coming from the man's wife and contained traditional herbs. The driver told us the man was practicing as a traditional healer in Johannesburg.

The man, wearing a brown leather jacket in that summer heat, came to the bus with a friend. He looked and sounded very pleased as he collected his parcel.

"You were carrying a very important parcel," the man commended the driver. He gave the driver a wad of R100 notes. That must have been a hefty bonus as the driver said the wife had already paid him for the parcel.

As we left Midrand, a young woman on the bus was worried. A friend who had promised to fetch and accommodate her was no longer answering the phone. She became suspicious that the friend was avoiding her. We drove through Midrand and Sandton on N1. The extensiveness of the roads and beauty of the buildings made Blantyre feel like one small town centre.

Perhaps it was not a mistake leaving Malawi for South Africa. The economy was much bigger and promised more opportunities. But then, it could also mean the competition was high. Maybe a friend who advised me to remain in Malawi until I secured a job in South Africa was right.

I expressed my fears to my husband, Zondani, when we discussed my relocation.

"We are a team," he said. And as a team, we would succeed.

As I feared, getting a job in South Africa was not easy. I applied for hundreds of jobs and attended several interviews. I only got my first job in 2013. And the job opened opportunities for me. In 2015, I got a bursary from Old Mutual to study for a Master's degree at Wits Journalism. My life has expanded in other areas too. I now have two girls.

We got to our destination, Park Station just after 4pm. That marked my arrival in Johannesburg, a place I would learn to call home. The bus host took to the mic, wished us well during our stay and asked us to use their service again. One woman prayed, thanking God for the safe trip and asking for protection during our stay in South Africa.

It was the end of the journey for me. For the drivers, they would continue ferrying more and more Malawians seeking their gold in *Joni*. An average of 15 to 20 buses leave Malawi for South Africa every week, according to Immigration Department spokesman, Joseph Chauwa. The passengers include visitors, traders, students, and documented and undocumented migrants.

It appears many Malawians live in South Africa but I could not establish the number. I tried, without success, to get the numbers and comments on the corruption from South Africa's Department of Home Affairs.

When I met the Consul General, Fraser Nihorya, he said he does not know the number of Malawians living in the country. The law demands that all Malawians must report to the Consulate upon arrival in South Africa but a negligible few do that.

"There is a fear that we can connive with authorities to hand them in. But we are here to protect the interest of Malawians," he said, referring to undocumented migrants. But even documented migrants are either unaware or ignore the law, which is written in their passports.

Nihorya said his office is working with different associations to establish an estimate of Malawian residents by the end of 2016.

Anecdotal evidence suggests Malawians form a significant portion of migrants. A study by researchers from Africa Centre for Migration and Society conducted between 2009 and 2010 at the Lindela Repatriation Centre, where undocumented migrants are detained while awaiting repatriation, found migrants from Malawi and DRC topped the list at 14% for each country. But that cannot be extrapolated to estimate the portion of Malawians among immigrants. The 2011 Census found about 1.7-million people out of the population of 51.7-million were non-South African citizens.

Returning to *Joni*

In February 2016 I set out to interview bus hosts. My first choice was Intercape, the bus that I used most. But I found the company no longer has hosts on its buses servicing the route between Malawi and South Africa. A spokesman from Intercape refused to shed more light on why it stopped having bus hosts and other issues.

I went to Park Station and met a bus host who appeared popular. As I arrived he was busy complaining to a friend that *wa matola* (hitchhiker) he picked from Malawi duped him. The hitchhiker promised to pay the bus host when they arrived in Joburg. The bus host even spoke on the phone with the hitchhiker's friend, who was in Johannesburg. The friend promised to meet them and pay upon arrival. That did not happen. I did not get the whole story about how the hitchhiker escaped.

I asked the bus host, who has been working for over a year, how Malawians that overstayed their visas go home and return to South Africa; how they cross the borders.

Undocumented migrants with old passports often obtain emergency travel documents from the Malawi Consulate to cover up their overstay status, he said. If a passenger wants to go through the immigration office at Beitbridge on the South African side, they have to pay a bribe of R300 to be assisted speedily. They pay R100 at Beitbridge Zimbabwean side and R50 at the rest of the borders except at Mwanza.

I asked why the migrants pay the bribes.

Because everyone with a Malawian emergency travel document is suspected to have overstayed their previous visa, he claimed.

If a passenger is still using the old passport, they choose to either face the immigration officers or 'jump the border', he said. If they go through the immigration desk the migrants get a stamp indicating they overstayed in South Africa and the period they are not allowed back in the country. The same applies to those holding the new passport. They can choose to 'jump the border' at a cost of R200. In the past lucky migrants would pay immigration officers to get a backdated stamp, he said.

"That is not possible nowadays. At Beitbridge they removed the stamps for 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2014."

"So if the passenger 'jumps the border' how would they return?"

"They have to change names and get a new passport otherwise their name would be found in the system," he said.

The bus host spoke about the practice of getting new passports using different names casually. I could sense it is a common practice among undocumented migrants.

I asked the Malawi Immigration spokesman, Joseph Chauwa, if his department was aware of the practice. He could neither confirm nor deny; he only said: “That is difficult with the current system where fingerprints are also registered on application. So even where the names are changed the system can detect the fingerprints.”

Chauwa said the new passports, which were introduced to conform to the United Nations’ agency responsible for aviation administration, the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) regulations, are machine readable.

Returning to South Africa is difficult for migrants using the new passport, which is difficult to obtain under a new name. The bus host insisted their bus service does not accept passengers with overstay records.

“But how do such passengers enter South Africa?” I persisted.

“We drop them off at Beitbridge on the Zimbabwean side,” he said. I did not remind him that he had just told me they don’t carry such passengers. “We don’t want to get in trouble with Home Affairs for carrying them.”

From the Zimbabwe border, the bus host said, the migrants board Quantum minibuses that smuggle them through Beitbridge border to Johannesburg.

“If they go to the Quantum on their own they pay R1,500. If I take them there, they only pay R800,” the host said.

He dialled a number on his phone and appeared to be making a call. Without a goodbye he walked away. Perhaps he was avoiding more questions or he was still trying to get hold of the hitchhiker to get his money.

The smugglers

After meeting the bus host, I wanted to interview one or two drivers. The bus host told me there was no driver around. A friend from Malawi, a student at Wits University, offered to take me to another place where I would find bus drivers. He had used some of them to send parcels home.

We walked southwards from Park Station crossing several streets until we joined Pritchard Street. We turned left on Pritchard Street and walked past the High Court. Further down, at Corner Pritchard and Nugget Street, we found two blocks colourfully painted with adverts for a couple of bus companies that service the Malawi route. There were no buses in sight that hot Monday morning. We found several men sitting and some standing in front of the buildings. Three men rushed to us asking in Chichewa if we needed tickets. Two were put off and left when I said no. One tall and slender man, wearing a green work suit jacket, was friendly and took me to the drivers. My friend waited outside. The warehouse, which doubled as a booking office, was packed on the sides with bicycles, furniture, and other large parcels. We found two drivers sleeping on two old couches, with their shirts unbuttoned.

One driver woke up. I introduced myself and the purpose of my visit. Without any response, he just closed his eyes. I guessed that was a no to my request. The other driver, looking even more exhausted, woke up. I introduced myself and the topic. With a soft polite voice, he said I could go ahead.

He explained that when returning to Malawi, most undocumented migrants opt to 'jump the border' out of fear that if they go through the immigration office their fingerprints would be captured and kept in Home Affairs records.

Like the bus host who I met at Park Station, the driver told me their service does not accept passengers that overstayed their visas in South Africa. If a passenger who overstayed a previous visa insists, the bus takes them but "they find their own means" at the borders, he said.

"When coming from Malawi we drop them off at Beitbridge on the Zimbabwean side because they insisted that they would sort themselves out," he said.

"What happens to their luggage?" I asked him.

"They don't carry big luggage. Usually it's just a laptop bag," he said.

The driver explained that the migrants, with assistance from smugglers found at the border, either cross Limpopo River through uncharted routes or use Quantum minibuses. That was the second time I heard about the smugglers. Unfortunately, I was running out of time to find one of them to hear how it works.

The bus driver told me using the smugglers is very risky.

“They rip the migrants off. They charge them R500. When they get to Joburg they change. They hold the migrants in Jeppe and Yeoville and demand R2,000,” he said.

I heard a similar story from a Malawian lady working in Johannesburg West. Her cousin was held up by unknown people at Beitbridge and they demanded R1,500. They said it was for accommodation for the days they kept him. They threatened they would not release him until the money was paid.

The bus driver was keener to tell me the challenges they face as drivers and the fines they pay when stopped by Police. In South Africa, the police often check if the drivers are carrying undocumented migrants. “Not wishing to delay, we just pay *ma* R50.”

In Zimbabwe they usually check tyres and lights. If they find any fault, the driver pays a fine of US$20. If the bus delayed a lot and missed its expected schedule they are also fined.

At that point, the sleeping driver woke up and joined the conversation.
“If they find several faults you are fined US$20 for each fault,” the second driver chipped in.

In Mozambique, they mostly check the validity of the bus’s permit. For an expired permit they get a fine of MZM20,000 (about R6,400). If the bus is overloaded, the driver is in trouble too.

“If they find any luggage inside the bus, you pay… During Christmas time the buses are so full people even sit in the corridors,” the second driver explained.

Reflection

As I left the drivers resting, I could not help but reflect on the migrants' journeys. As we walked back to Wits University in Braamfontein, that was all we talked about with my friend. He shared his own experiences and views. I was of the view that with the introduction of the new passport in Malawi, the number of undocumented migrants coming to South Africa would decline over time. He disagreed. He said other factors such as the introduction of South Africa's New Immigration Regulations seemed to have failed to reduce the numbers, all it did was to increase the bribes. He also said it would take Malawi a very long time to finish the ambitious project of providing national identity cards to all its citizens. He said corrupt officials would continue giving access to the migrants. He said migrants, scared of the official routes, would also resort to using uncharted ways, where they would be at the mercy of their smugglers.

The economic situation in Malawi is not making life any easier. Since the donors pulled out direct support to the national budget following the corruption scandal in 2013 dubbed cashgate, life has been getting tough. Inflation is rising, the Kwacha is steadily losing value against the major trading currencies and unemployment is on the rise. Donors used to support about 40 percent of the budget. These are perfect factors to push desperate people to migrate. And South Africa, though grappling with a slow growing economy and increasing unemployment levels, still remains a hope for many.

So far, news reports have shown that some migrants that were repatriated during the most recent xenophobic attacks in 2015 are beginning to return to South Africa. The Malawi government promised to introduce programmes to help the migrants settle down but that is a tall order with the shoe-string budget the country is operating on.

The corruption at the borders seems to be well-coordinated that it is not easy to root out. The officers, drivers, bus assistants and middlemen involved seem well-organised and make their underhand transactions discreetly. In all my eight trips I have never witnessed a moment when the money is passed on from the bus assistants to the officers. And so said all the migrants I spoke with in this project. Except, for those who handed their money directly to the officers and guards at the borders. Those that handed their money to bus assistants or drivers were not sure if all the money was handed to the officers. They had no idea if the drivers and assistants got a cut. And they did not seem interested to know how the money was shared. To them, their goal was to work in South Africa and they were grateful for the help they got to make their journey possible.

Word Count: 11,966