

IN AFRICA

**A little girl repatriated under ICRC auspices<sup>1</sup>**

*Child Maria Ligia already arrived Dar es-Salaam good health stop please contact us to organize her departure stop greetings FRELIMO<sup>2</sup>.*

This was a telegram relayed via Geneva and Pretoria to an ICRC delegate whilst on mission last June to visit the South African prison of Robben Island. It is surprising for more than one reason. The repatriation of this five-year old girl is a moving story which was to have a happy ending a few days later.

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The delegate, accompanied by a doctor-delegate, was in Porto Amelia in the north-east of Mozambique in January 1974, visiting political detainees in Portuguese prisons. He heard that in a neighbouring hospital there was a wounded man who wished to see him. The doctor-delegate went to the hospital where he met Tomé Fernandez Barao who related that a few days previously when fighting was going on between the army and FRELIMO fighters, his five-year-old daughter disappeared.

“At the beginning of the fighting,” he said, “my wife and I ran for shelter but when my wife seized hold of our two eldest children and called me to carry Maria I was hit by shrapnel. When I came to my senses I was in hospital and our daughter had disappeared. I thought she might be with FRELIMO. I beg you to find her.”

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<sup>1</sup> *Plate.*

<sup>2</sup> FRELIMO: Mozambique Liberation Front.

The delegate immediately cabled to Geneva and enquiries were instituted. A few days later, in February, there were FRELIMO representatives at the Diplomatic Conference on Humanitarian Law. They were contacted and said that if the girl was with FRELIMO, they would see to it that she was repatriated by the ICRC as soon as she reached Dar es-Salaam.

At the end of May, after various correspondence between Geneva and Dar es-Salaam, the ICRC delegate was informed that Maria could be repatriated. In the Tanzanian capital, he was given an account of the circumstances of the tragedy which had occurred: caught in the firing, the child was likely to be wounded or killed; members of the FRELIMO realized that the only way of saving her was to take her away from the fighting. This they did but were then compelled to keep her with them until they themselves reached safety. In this way, on the back of one of the men, the little girl crossed hundreds of kilometres of bush, finally to reach Dar es-Salaam safe and sound.

The day after her arrival in Tanzania, 11 June 1974, the delegate flew to Beira in Mozambique, via Blantyre in Malawi. He takes over the story from there:

*"On our arrival in Beira, there was considerable excitement. The local authorities were represented at the airport with many journalists and above all there were the girl's parents. Her father, minus a leg, was in a wheel chair; her mother, who since the tragedy had been suffering from shock and had lost the power of speech, burst into tears and started to speak again when she had her daughter in her arms."*

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