

Like many others, financial hardship was the impetus behind Gladys's decision to become a mule. "A desperate situation required a desperate measure, but this decision has gotten out of hand," she once wrote to Linda. "No words can express the pain, hurt and agony I have been through, and have put my family through." And when the drug traffickers' strategy is understood, one has to wonder whether the punishment fits the crime. "Syndicates recruit several mules at a time to carry varying quantities of narcotics," Linda explains. "But they also designate some as decoys, who are then arrested by airport customs officials after a tip-off from the syndicates. Meanwhile, the mules carrying larger consignments of drugs slip through customs undetected."

SEND OUR PEOPLE HOME

Despite difficulties in communication, Linda and Gladys have developed a close connection. Gladys remains at the mercy of the postal system to communicate with loved ones. This feeling of isolation is compounded by the strict visitation rules imposed by the prison. "If family members fly over to see them, they are allowed 30 minutes for one visit only," Linda says. Over the past few years, Gladys's siblings have visited her, and her daughter, Tanny, visited two years ago. The visit was so heart-wrenching, Tanny decided to refrain from visiting for the foreseeable future.

Despite regular visits by the South African consulate in Bangkok, the government's unrelenting stance on prisoner exchange means there is little the prisoners can hope for. South Africa has no prisoner exchange treaty with Thailand, or any other country, denying prisoners the possibility of being extradited. The prisoners continue to hope for a change to the law, and have sent petitions to the South African consulate, which, according

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to Douglas Gibson, South Africa's ambassador to Thailand, have been sent on to President Zuma. He confirms South Africa's stance: "The government will not interfere with the course of justice in foreign countries, and the 1,000 or so South African citizens in prisons around the world must serve their punishment where they committed the crime."

"The lack of a Prisoner Transfer Agreement (PTA) is archaic, and somewhat unacceptable, considering South Africa boasts one of the best constitutions in the world," says Belinda West, founder and director of Locked Up: 2nd Chances for SA's Inmates, an NGO dedicated to raising awareness about South Africans in foreign jails.

Gladys's hope for freedom rests, at least for now, with a pardon from the

king of Thailand. Gibson visited the head of corrections in Thailand to enquire about the progress of outstanding pardon applications, and was told that the king grants just one out of thousands a month.

Despite the agonising progress, the courage of Gladys and the others like her is admirable. Gibson says: "I found them all to be in good health and spirits, which is quite remarkable, considering the circumstances in which they now find themselves."

THE KINDNESS EFFECT

Gladys's friendship has given Linda the opportunity to reflect on aspects of life that we often take for granted. "I admire Gladys's strength, wisdom and courage, and her ability not to dwell on the past," Linda says. "Communicating with her has given me the confidence to reach out to people, and I find it easier to maintain a feeling of compassion." She hopes that sooner, rather than later, she will be able to enjoy a long walk along the coastline of Gladys's hometown of Durban, and watch her friend savour the freedom she so longed for, in a country synonymous with freedom itself. **O**

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Quick buck is lure for SA drug mules

No shortage, despite harsh consequences

By ZWANA SUEK LIMAR

'Take my baby back to Cape Town'

Grandmother agonises over three-year-old girl in Venezuelan prison with mom

1 000 South Africans languishing in foreign jails

HOW YOU CAN HELP:

- Locked Up: 2nd Chances for South African Inmates is running a petition for the signing of a prisoner exchange treaty by South Africa. Visit mypetition.co.za and select petition number 271.
- Anyone who wants to assist the imprisoned women can send an e-mail to Linda Morris: kevinmor@iafrica.com
- Donations for the female prisoners can be deposited into a bank account managed by a missionary, Resa D. Sausa, based in Thailand. The details are: Resa D. Sausa, Bangkok Bank Ltd., Rangsit Lamluka Pathumthani, Thailand 12130. Swift code: BKKBTHBK. Account number: 2370023075.