

Mozambique: Vigil InSight Situation Report

15 March 2021

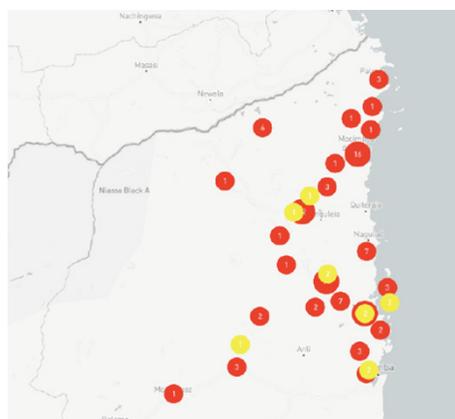
670,000 people have been displaced in Cabo Delgado province, Mozambique since 2017, as Islamic State (ISCAP) consolidates.

This document provides an analysis of the current situation in the Cabo Delgado region in Northern Mozambique and the implications for aid agencies working in the area. [Link to the Vigil InSight Voiceover.](#)

Summary

- **Insurgents**, increasingly influenced by the Islamic State's 'Central Africa Province' (ISCAP), **launched rocket and mortar attacks for the first time in 2020.**
- **Government security operations**, supported by private security companies, have **led to a drop in insurgents attacks in recent months.**
- **International human rights NGOs** have **accused government forces of violent attacks on civilians** accused of collaborating with insurgents and **foreign private military contractors** of indiscriminate **firing at civilians.**
- **The violence has increased humanitarian needs** but puts key **aid programmes** related to **food security, health and education in jeopardy.**
- **Aid agencies remain at risk from the counter insurgency and militants** who may seek to maintain momentum and score propaganda successes drive out the remaining non-Muslim population.

Cluster maps showing number of incidents in the Cabo Delgado area for incidents affecting aid operations (yellow circles), and incidents affecting civilians (red circles), from 01 January 2020 to 31 December 2020, split across three time windows



01 January – 01 May 2020



01 May – 01 September 2020



01 September – 31 December 2020

LEGEND

● Incidents affecting civilians

● Incidents affecting aid operations

Vigil InSight: incidents are based on the 2020 **Threats and violence against aid delivery in Cabo Delgado, Mozambique Data** by Insecurity Insight¹ and the ACLED (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project) data.²

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MITIGATION FOR AID AGENCIES

Despite the increased security force activity and recent fall in the rate of incidents, the threat from Islamist militants in Cabo Delgado remains high. Although aid agencies will need to continue their own assessments of how to adjust their security strategies, there are options available:

- Ensure planners and other staff maintain a high degree of situational awareness and drawing on all available information support in order to assess route planning and other activities.
- Consider wearing PPE in high-risk areas at all times, in particular for high level passengers or those exposed to particular risks, such as drivers.
- Carry suitable medical and breakdown kits at all times and ensure staff are trained to use them, regularly.
- Routes should be varied if possible, despite the increased security presence on main roads.
- Restrict circle of knowledge of travel for security communications.
- Use vehicle trackers/ check in with office.
- No social media surrounding travel for high-risk projects and individuals.

Context: Islamist Insurgents in the Cabo Delgado Region

The recent history of instability in Cabo Delgado Province goes back to 2015 when a group called Ansar al-Sunna (alternatively, Ahlu Sunna Wal Jamaa, or ASWJ) emerged in the north of the province. They were inspired by the followers of a radical Kenyan cleric named Aboud Rogo, a key figure in fundraising for al-Qaeda's African operations in the 1990s and later al-Shabaab in Somalia, who fled to Tanzania and then Mozambique after he was assassinated in Mombasa in 2012.

Ansar al-Sunna claims that local Islamic practices have been corrupted by contact with Christianity and the West. It has called for Sharia law to be implemented, despite the fact that Muslims only make up a slim majority of the population in Cabo Delgado and tries to prevent people from attending hospitals or schools which it considers haram (un-Islamic). Religion is not, however, the only major driver of the insurgency. Social and economic problems are also key causes that remain largely unaddressed despite international investment in the oil and gas sectors.

Ansar al-Sunna is mostly made up of Mozambicans from the Mocímboa da Praia, Palma and Macomia districts. Locals sometimes refer to the group as "al-Shabaab", but it (despite its historical link to the cleric Rogo), is a separate organisation from the Somali group of the same name. That said, there are links and there is evidence that it has been bolstered by foreign nationals, mainly from Somalia and Tanzania.

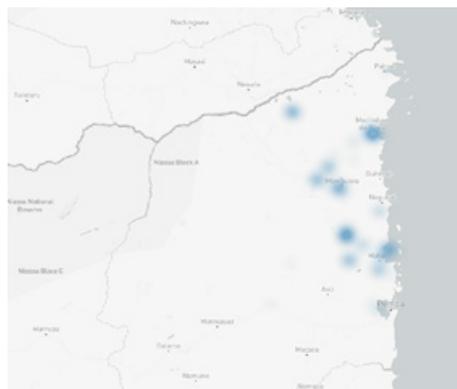
The first credible reports of the presence of foreign fighters belonging to the parent Islamic State (IS) group came in April 2018 when the South African media suggested that around 90 IS militants had infiltrated northern Mozambique – something denied by the government in Maputo. The following month, however, the African Union announced that it had confirmed the presence of IS members in Mozambique.

The first major incident that IS's "Central Africa Province" (ISCAP) claimed responsibility for in Mozambique was the June 2019 attack on the Mozambican Army in Mocímboa da Praia District in which at least 16 people were killed. This was belatedly recognised by the US State Department on 10 March, when it finally designated ISCAP as a terrorist organisation. President Nyusi subsequently sacked the heads of the Mozambique Army and Air Force, as well as a number of more junior commanders, in response to their failure to secure the Cabo Delgado area.

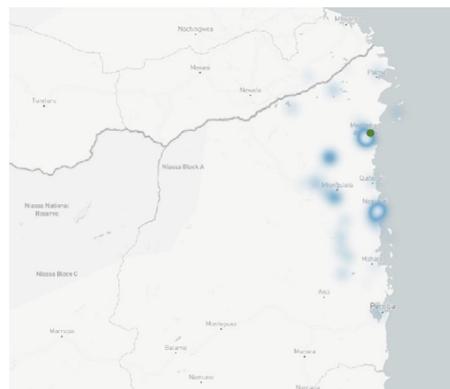
TREND ANALYSIS

Available data (illustrated in the maps below) shows that the first months of 2021 have seen a reduction in the intensity of attacks compared to earlier in 2020. The government has – with some justification - attributed this to its increased counter insurgency operations. Although the US military and Mozambique have now started a **Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET)** programme that the government has been requesting for several years, the course has been running for less than a week. Indeed, previous efforts to request international military support had limited effect, meaning that Mozambique’s army has instead turned to the support of foreign private military contractors (PMC), including those from Russia which is keen to extend its influence in the region. Their presence, coupled with a sharp rise in collateral civilian casualties, risks undermining the local population’s support for security measures. Indeed, the past week has seen high-profile accusations by Amnesty International against the **South African PMC**, Dyck Advisory Group, which it accuses of firing indiscriminately against civilians. Meanwhile, the militants’ beheadings of a number of men from Russia’s Wagner Group – accused of atrocities in both Syria and Libya - in January, highlighted their presence.

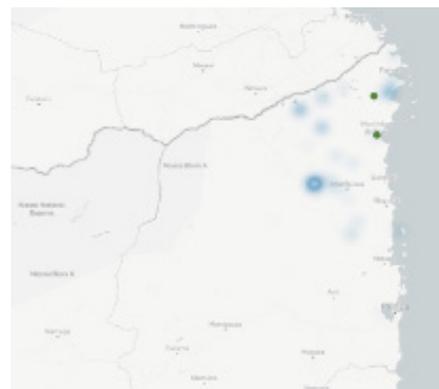
Heat maps showing incidents in the Cabo Delgado area from 01 January 2020 to 26th February 2021, split across three time windows³



01 January – 01 June 2020



01 June - 01 November 2020



01 November 2020 - 26 February 2021

Social Media Comments

Claims war against insurgents orchestrated by government

Using comments functions on social media, people in Mozambique question whether the conflict in Cabo Delgado is real.

They distrust government motives in trying to stem the Islamist insurgency in the north and believe it may be driven by financial motives and that soldiers in disguise pose as insurgents.

[Read the full analysis here.](#)

LEGEND

● Locations for incidents where the use of indirect fire by Islamist groups was recorded:

08 August 2020: heavy clashes between members of an Islamist militia and the FDS forces, with assistance of a private security group (DAG) were registered in Mocimboa da Praia. The group used a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) to sink a Mozambique’s HSI32 Interceptor ship.

07 December 2020: Islamist militia clashed with Mozambican military forces in the village of Mute. The militia also destroyed civilian houses, using mortars and RPGs.

08 December 2020: Islamist militia clashed with Mozambican military forces in Ngueo. Insurgents also attacked civilians and destroyed several houses, using mortars and RPGs.

15 February 2021: February, 2021: members of an Islamist militia clashed with Mozambican Defense and Security Forces in Roma near Mocimboa Da Praia using RPGs and machine-gun fire.

Vigil InSight: incidents are based on the **2020 Threats and violence against aid delivery in Cabo Delgado, Mozambique Data** by Insecurity Insight⁴ and the ACLED (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project) data.⁵

There are a number of obvious broad threat trends that can be drawn from the data and maps.

- Despite being far from unified, with cells often failing to coordinate their actions, the insurgency continued to intensify through 2018, 2019 and 2020. The first six months of 2020 alone saw as many attacks launched as in the whole of 2019 as ISCAP's influence grew.
- Although the scale of attacks in Cabo Delgado has dropped over recent months, it remains the most significant high-threat area for aid organisations and commercial enterprises in Mozambique. This may in part, however, also be because of a **lack of higher profile targets**. Aid organisations have been careful to apply risk mitigation measures in response to the heightened threat in Cabo Delgado.
- The target areas of air strikes and other military action by the Mozambique Government against the militants have expanded from last year's focus on Palma district, the site of the major gas projects, to the whole province. Indeed, ISCAP's main focus is now on Nangade town where it is establishing roadblocks in the area, in order to secure the town, and target military convoys using the main road.
- The very limited boost to the local economy likely from the Total gas project and the small number of new jobs will only serve to boost local resentment and thus support for the militants.
- President Nyusi's offer of amnesty for insurgents on 03 February has had a negligible impact. It may merely have been intended to bolster the justification for increased military activity in Cabo Delgado.
- Thanks to support from foreign fighters, militants have been able to launch a limited number of rocket and mortar attacks over the past year (as shown on the maps above), a type of attack not previously seen.
- The insurgents remain focused on undermining support for both the government and for foreign involvement in the area. This extends both to the oil and gas industry but also to foreign-influenced aid organisations that they view as un-Islamic. **Health facilities** were frequently set on fire during militant attacks on villages and towns in 2019 and 2020.

Incident type⁷ and frequency for the heat maps showing incidents in the Cabo Delgado area from 1st January 2020 to 26th February 2021⁸

| Incident type | Number of incidents | Number of incidents | Number of incidents |
|--|-----------------------------|------------------------------|--|
| | 01 January – 31 May 2020 | 01 June – 31 October 2020 | 01 November 2020 – 26 February 2021 |
| Attack on Mozambican civilian(s) | 127 | 131 | 60 |
| Armed confrontation (involving military, political, communal and/or Islamist armed groups) | 22 | 59 | 40 |
| Incidents where government forces used direct and/or indirect fire | 12 | 11 | 11 |
| Looting and/or property destruction | 11 | 33 | 9 |
| Abduction of Mozambican civilian(s) | 6 | 16 | 7 |
| Displacement | 1 | 10 | 1 |
| Crime | 1 | 0 | 3 |
| Violent protest | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Attack on Tanzanian civilian(s) | 0 | 3 | 0 |
| Election-related violence | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| Incidents where insurgent groups used indirect fire | 0 | 1 | 3 |
| Sexual violence | 0 | 3 | 0 |
| Incidents affecting operational space | 11 | 2 | 1 |
| Crime | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| Incidents affecting aid contractors | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Incidents resulting in damage at aid office or project site | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| Looting and/or property destruction | 1 | 0 | 0 |

- Attacks on civilians often target food security. Partly to extort funding, food and other supplies for the fighters but also in an attempt to displace the non-Muslim population. Labourers and fishermen have become particularly frequently targeted. Indeed, robbery, looting, arson and intimidation make up around 90% of reported attacks. This has created more than **half a million Internally Displaced Persons (IDP)** over the past three years, a significant number of whom are frequently subjected to further attacks.
- The militants launched their first significant attack in Tanzania in October 2020 with 300 fighters crossing from Mozambique to attack a village, destroying a medical facility and factory in southern Tanzania's rural Mtwara region in a modus operandi very similar to the most recent major attacks in Mozambique.
- Political tensions between the FRELIMO-controlled government and its former adversaries RENAMO remain although these are most likely to come to the fore during pre-election periods as was seen in around the October 2019 General Election.

Predictions

- The overall scale of militant attacks will likely continue to drop as the sophistication and firepower of the security forces continues to grow with foreign support. However, the security forces' increased use of drones and helicopters and focus on securing gas sites means that militant activity is merely likely to be displaced elsewhere – raising the threat to aid operations and development programmes and other sectors.
- This displacement may lead to a further escalation of attacks around Nangade and also in southern Tanzania.
- Although rocket, mortar and IED attacks remain uncommon, their use looks likely to increase as the insurgents switch to asymmetric tactics, as support from their own foreign backers grows and in response to the security changing tactics.
- Similar Islamist insurgencies elsewhere in Africa and in the Middle East and Asia have shifted towards criminally focused and intimidatory attacks against civilians. It is possible that these will increase in frequency in Cabo Delgado as the militants try to maintain the momentum of their campaign, having been driven away from the gas facilities. This will also support their propaganda objectives and drive out the remaining non-Muslim population.
- Reduced food supplies as a result of government restrictions on movement combined with the impact of the insurgency on local agriculture will cause hardship to local populations, increase aid needs and may at the same time be a driver for further attacks on food-producing civilians.
- Remaining aid, health and education projects may also come under even greater threat given the limited number of possible targets and the proportionally greater propaganda value of such projects. However, commercial organisations working outside the main security perimeters will remain a key target.
- Increased security force activity – and in particular the growing use of aerial assets to identify and strike targets – risks an even greater number of collateral civilian casualties. Risk aversion to casualties among their own personnel by foreign PMCs further increases this risk.

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¹ **Insecurity Insight** collated data from multiple public sources and confidential contributions from aid agencies. The data may differ from other sources. The data is part of the **Aid in Danger** project. For more information on Insecurity Insight visit our website on **Aid Security** and **Bi-Monthly News Brief**, or **subscribe** for updates.

² Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) **database attribution policy**. Accessed 04 March 2021.

³ Data for any NGO-related incidents covers 01 January 2020 – 31 December 2020.

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⁵ Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) **database attribution policy**. Accessed 04 March 2021.

⁶ Incidents affecting aid operations are displayed in green.

⁷ Data for any NGO-related incidents covers 01 January 2020 – 31 December 2020.

About Vigil InSight

This incident analysis is part of Vigil InSight, a joint initiative by **HawkSight, DHC, Gunn** and **Insecurity Insight**. It is prepared from information available in local, national and international news outlets, consultations with key informants and data from Insecurity Insight **Aid in Danger** project and the **Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)**.

The incidents reported are not a complete nor a representative list of all events that affected the provision of aid delivery and have not been independently verified. All decisions made, on the basis of, or with consideration to, such information remains the responsibility of their respective organisations.

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Upcoming events

Good Friday: Friday, 02 April 2021. Easter Sunday: Sunday, 04 Apr 2021

Ramadan: Monday, 12 April to Wednesday, 12 May 2021

Eid al-Fitr: Wednesday, 12 May to Thursday, 13 May 2021

Independence Day: Friday, 25 June 2021

Eid al-Adha: Monday, 19 July to Friday, 23 July 2021

