

ACTIONABLE BUSINESS RISK INTELLIGENCE



MOZAMBIQUE: CABO DELGADO INSURGENCY REMAINS RESILIENT DESPITE DROP IN VIOLENCE 12 March 2021

Despite a drop in the frequency of attacks since the start of 2021, the Mozambican security forces have made little visible progress in countering the Islamist insurgency in the country's northern Cabo Delgado Province. The coming months are likely to see a gradual re-escalation of fighting, with a significant likelihood of further attacks in the province's gas-producing areas.

The past year saw a significant expansion and intensification of the Islamist insurgency in Mozambique's northern Cabo Delgado Province. According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, over the course of 2020 there were 437 violent incidents in the region with 1,600 related fatalities, more than double the figures recorded during the previous year.

The start of 2021 has provided few indications that the conflict is subsiding. While there has been a recent drop in the number of militant attacks, and insurgents are reportedly struggling with growing resource shortages, counter-insurgency operations by the Forças Armadas de Moçambique (FADM) and police have made little visible headway. Crucially, despite repeated attempts by state forces to retake the key port town of Mocimboa da Praia, the urban centre still remains under the control of the Islamist fighters of Ahlu-Sunnah Wa-Jama (ASWJ).

Moreover, on 2 March 2021, Amnesty International released a report documenting extensive human rights violations allegedly committed in Cabo Delgado by the Mozambican security forces, including widespread extrajudicial killings and torture of civilians suspected of collaborating with militants. The report also details incidents in which South African Private Military Company (PMC), Dyck Advisory Group, which operates helicopters in support of Mozambican forces, repeatedly used both small arms and explosive ordnance on multiple occasions without discerning between civilian and military targets.

While the Mozambican government has denied the allegations, claiming that it is propaganda meant to undermine the image of the security forces, the report supports broader observations of dwindling trust in the government in Cabo Delgado. PANGEA-RISK assesses the current security situation, and expands on the potential evolution of the conflict in the months to come.

Current state of the insurgency



The start of 2021 saw a significant drop in the frequency of militant attacks in Cabo Delgado, which was subsequently interpreted by a number of observers as a signal that the insurgency was on the back foot. Moreover, civilians who escaped ASWJ in January 2021 have testified that the group is severely short on both cash and food. While these reports cannot be directly substantiated, agricultural production in Cabo Delgado has been severely affected by erratic weather patterns over the past year, and a high number of farmers have fled the area due to the conflict, which is likely to have reduced sources of food for the insurgents. Over the past two months, the group has spontaneously released a significant number of hostages, providing further indications that resource constraints may be preventing them from supporting high numbers of captives.

In early February, the government rapidly scaled up its offensive operations, focusing on Mocimboa da Praia and Muidumbe districts. A high tempo of helicopter operations targeting insurgent bases have been reported in the area around the Messalo River, which forms the southern border between the two districts. However, heavy rains have reportedly slowed the progress of FADM and police ground advances, and there have been few reports of successful clear-and-hold operations

being conducted in either district.

Nonetheless, some signs of government successes have been observed elsewhere. Notably, the security environment in Macomia has improved significantly in recent months, as indicated by the return of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) to the district in early February. MSF withdrew from Macomia district in June 2020 after one of its health facilities was attacked by insurgents.

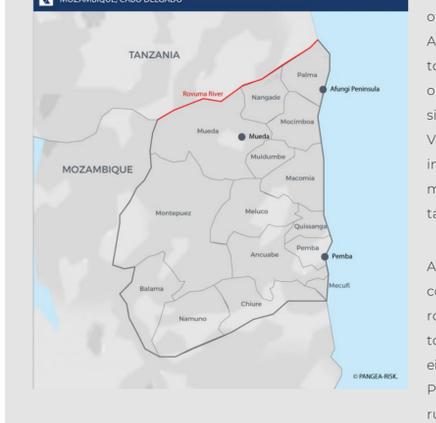
However, an assessment that the insurgency is at imminent risk of collapse appears premature. Firstly, the current drop in militant activity matches the pattern observed in the previous year: Over January and February 2021, there were 56 attacks attributed to ASWJ, compared to 49 attacks recorded during the same period in 2020. Moreover, the lull at the beginning of last year was also rapidly followed by a major increase in the frequency and scale of attacks after April. This suggests that seasonal rains and the agricultural lean season are currently more pertinent constraints on insurgent activity rather than government security operations.

Secondly, while government statements regarding militant casualties abound – largely unsubstantiated and difficult to independently confirm – and government responses to militant attacks on civilian villages have been lauded as successes, there have been few reports of militants readily abandoning entrenched positions. Rather, resistance to recent FADM advances has steadily grown since mid-February, when heavy fighting was reported near Diaca and Roma in Mocimboa da Praia district as insurgents armed with RPGs and machine guns launched counterattacks on government forces. In mid-December, forces attempting to advance on Awasse, 30km from Mocimboa da Praia, were ambushed and forced to return to their base at Mueda after facing heavy resistance.



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Insurgents retain focus on gas producing areas



Nonetheless, the lack of overland freight to the town will mean that supply shortages are unlikely to be rapidly resolved.

Recently, militants passed messages to civilians living in Palma, threatening to attack the town on 5 March. Although no attack was forthcoming, security forces were diverted to protect the town, highlighting the extent to which the insurgents are able to draw on the Mozambican government's overstretched security resources with little effort.

Provision of security assistance delayed

Long-standing deficiencies in the Mozambican security sector mean that the FADM and police forces remain unable to mount an effective counter-insurgency campaign on their own, and their dependence on external PMCs has seemingly provided few benefits besides gaining a little breathing room. However, there are few signs that Mozambique's regional and international allies will provide any kind of meaningful intervention in the coming months (see MOZAMBIQUE: GROWING REGIONALISATION OF THE ISLAMIST INSURGENCY).



FADM SOLDIERS IN PEMBA, MOZAMBIQUE

Mozambique's President, Filipe Nyusi, has continued to resist offers of direct assistance from regional states. An SADC intergovernmental summit which was meant to take place in January to discuss a regional response to the crisis has reportedly been postponed until May or June to allow for SADC military commanders to first meet. Officials from South Africa's Department of International Relations and Cooperation have expressed frustration that their Mozambican counterparts have yet to provide any kind of guidance as to the type of support that Mozambique needs. In January, Nyusi and Tanzanian President John Magufuli reportedly agreed to resume a joint commission on defence and security, although it is unclear when this will manifest or what form it will take.

In the interim, support from non-regional states appears more likely to manifest. During an interview in early February, Portuguese Defence Minister João Cravinho stated that a detachment from the Portuguese special forces could start conducting training activities with the FADM in Mozambique as early as April. Portugal will also provide some logistical and equipment support in line with the training programme. On 14 February, the new US Ambassador to Mozambique, Dennis Hearne, also asserted that the US is willing to provide security assistance in line with any requests by the Mozambican government.

At the same time, Mozambique's military general staff has been left in considerable confusion after the death on 8 February of new FADM Chief of Staff, General Eugénio Mussa. Mussa's appointment to the role in an abrupt reshuffle of high-ranking commanders in early January shifted primary responsibility for operations in Cabo Delgado from the police to the FADM. However, with no new replacement yet announced, the general's death has potentially degraded police-military cooperation. Moreover, the emergent leadership gap in the FADM may damage the prospects for the rapid provision of foreign military assistance; Portuguese military commanders have reportedly expressed hesitancy regarding the proposed training mission given Mussa's death.

Cross-border threat in southern Tanzania



THE MADIMBA NATURAL GAS PROCESSING PLANT IN TANZANIA

Tanzania's southern communities are vulnerable to radicalisation and recruitment by extremist elements, and security sources in Tanzania have expressed concern that ASWJ has already established recruitment networks amongst border communities in the country's south-eastern Mtwara Region. There are a number of attractive targets based in Mtwara which may attract ASWJ's attention, including the Madimba natural gas processing plant, (located approximately 16km north of the Mozambique-Tanzania border), and the attached Mtwara-Dar es Salaam Natural Gas Pipeline.

Since a series of attacks in Tanzania in October, there have been no further major cross-border incidents and there are no indications that ASWJ has an operational presence in southern Tanzania. Nonetheless, ASWJ continues to demonstrate the capability to conduct attacks in extremely close proximity to the Rovuma River, which forms the boundary between the two countries. For instance, over 19-20 February, militants attacked the village of Quionga in Palma district, 16km from the Tanzania-Mozambique border. After they were expelled by government forces on 20 February, they reportedly withdrew in the direction of Tanzania. In February and March, militants also attacked the Namoto border crossing station near Namuiranga on three separate instances, despite the area being reinforced by the Mozambican security forces.

In November 2020, the Tanzanian and Mozambican governments agreed to conduct joint police operations to enhance border security. Nonetheless, it remains unclear how effective these efforts will be, particularly given that the Mozambican security forces are unlikely to have sufficient available manpower to reinforce their border operations. An increase of ASWJ's capability in Tanzania will be indicated by the appearance of coordinated simultaneous assaults on multiple hardened targets in southern Tanzania, including the use of heavy weapons and large numbers of fighters, as well as access to local intelligence.

INSIGHT

Despite the dip in militant activity observed at the start of 2021, it is likely that the coming months will see a renewal of insurgent attacks in Cabo Delgado as the rainy season subsides and food supplies become more plentiful from late April onwards. While the primary target of ASWJ is likely to remain civilians and the state security forces of Mozambique, there is a high likelihood that ASWJ will increasingly focus its operations on Palma, especially if the FADM launches a concerted attempt to retake Mocimboa da Praia.



Ongoing insecurity in Palma district is likely to further delay the development of LNG operations in Cabo Delgado. Indeed, repeated delays to ExxonMobil's Final Investment Decision on the Rovuma LNG project are in large part due to the company's emphasis on adequate security arrangements as a pre-condition for proceeding. ASWJ has demonstrated a keen awareness of the importance of LNG development in the region, and targeting the sector complements the group's strategic and tactical goals. For instance, attacks in close proximity to LNG facilities both affect government revenues by disrupting commercial activity, and also directs security forces to expend significant resources in protecting LNG assets, potentially undermining government offensives in other districts and creating new security challenges (for the impact of the insurgency on Mozambique's economic outlook see MOZAMBIQUE: SLOW ECONOMIC RECOVERY POSES NEW AND OLD CHALLENGES).

While government offensives in the coming months may result in the displacement of insurgents, including from Mocimboa da Praia, the security forces have not demonstrated the capacity to hold terrain while simultaneously conducting offensive operations, and militants are likely to rapidly return to cleared areas as soon as government troops leave. This issue is unlikely to be rapidly resolved in the coming months; security assistance from international partners is likely to take some time to get off the ground and produce results. In the interim, continued reports of human rights violations by the Mozambican security forces and attached PMCs are likely to exacerbate distrust of the government in Cabo Delgado as well as to heighten the hesitancy of Mozambique's potential international security partners to provide large-scale security assistance, further eroding counter-insurgency efforts.