16 March 2021

Cabo Ligado Weekly: 8-14 March

_Cabo Ligado_ — or ‘connected cape’ — is a Mozambique conflict observatory launched by ACLED, Zitamar News, and Mediafax.

### BY THE NUMBERS

_Cabo Delgado, October 2017-March 2021_

- Total number of organized violence events: 829
- Total number of reported fatalities from organized violence: 2,658
- Total number of reported fatalities from civilian targeting: 1,341

All ACLED data are available for download via the [data export tool](#).

### SITUATION SUMMARY

Fighting continued in Nangade district last week, as local militias joined the battle to prevent the district capital from being isolated. On 10 March, a local militia drawn from Nangade district residents killed eight insurgents in the district. The exact location of the fighting is unclear. The militia members recovered five firearms and multiple machetes from the insurgents.

The insurgents were believed to be the same small group that had captured a couple earlier in the week, killing the man and releasing the woman. The woman then relayed the message that insurgents would soon target the villages of Ntamba and Liche in the far-southern part of Nangade district.

New information about attacks over the weekend of 6-7 March also became available last week. On 7 March, insurgents attacked a border post in Nonje, about four kilometers outside of Nangade town. Roughly 50 border police stationed there fled, but only 19 had arrived in Nangade town as of 12 March. Some of those who made it to Nangade town were treated for injuries sustained in the fighting.

The same day, insurgents attacked Chacamba, located about 13 kilometers northeast of Nangade town. No casualty estimates from that attack are available, but the village is now deserted.

Insurgents also attacked on 7 March at Namuembe, roughly 30 kilometers south of Nangade town. There, insurgents burned and looted homes, remaining in the town until the morning of 8 March. As in Chacamba, most residents fled to Nangade town.
Government forces were, however, able to reopen the road between Nangade town and Mueda after removing insurgent roadblocks near Litingina on 7 March. Cell phone service, which had also been down in the district since insurgents destroyed a Movitel antenna in Litingina, was restored on 8 March when members of the security services and district government repaired the antenna.

**INCIDENT FOCUS: US SANCTIONS**

Any question as to whether the Biden administration in the United States (US) would continue its predecessor’s engagement with the Mozambican government on security cooperation in Cabo Delgado was answered strongly in the affirmative last week. The State Department announced that it had designated ISIS-Mozambique as a Foreign Terrorist Organization and a Specially Designated Terrorist Group (SDTG) and added the man they called the leader of ISIS-Mozambique — Abu Yasir Hassan — to its list of Specially Designated Global Terrorists. In practice, this means that it is now a crime under US law to have any financial dealings with either ISIS-Mozambique or Hassan and any US holdings they have are now frozen. There is no indication that either have any US assets to freeze. As such, at the moment, the designations are largely symbolic as a counterterrorism measure.

One of the many ways the designations are noteworthy is that the US has become the first government — including the government of Mozambique — to name a leader of the Islamic State in Mozambique. Setting aside the question of whether being the Islamic State (IS) leader in Cabo Delgado is the same as being the leader of the Cabo Delgado insurgency, the designation of Hassan shows that US intelligence services believe they have some insight into the inner workings of militancy in Cabo Delgado.

To this point, however, they have been slow to share that insight. The only pieces of information revealed about Hassan in the designations are that he is a Tanzanian national, born between 1981 and 1983, who also goes by the names Yaseer Hassan and Abu Qasim. In a call with reporters, State Department officials declined to provide more information about Hassan, nor offer any explanation for how they concluded he was the leader of ISIS-Mozambique. Tanzanian officials have also offered little, although they appear more mystified by the designation than tight-lipped. Tanzania’s Inspector General of Police, Simon Sirro, told reporters that his office was aware of a man with the same name as Hassan who was involved in Islamist militancy, but that the man was already dead. Researchers who have worked on the insurgency’s origins believe that Hassan is not the single leader of IS in Mozambique, but does play a prominent role on the council that leads the group.

The designations also clarify the framework through which the Biden administration sees the conflict in Cabo Delgado. Designating ISIS-Mozambique an SDTG requires the Secretary of State to determine that the organization has “committed, or pose[s] a significant risk of committing, acts of terrorism that threaten the security of US nationals or the national security, foreign policy, or economy of the US.” Such a determination categorizes the conflict in Cabo Delgado not as a local conflict in need of local solutions but as a theater in the US-led struggle against IS. Indeed, State Department officials were quick to claim that “the evidence of ties between the ISIS branch or network in Mozambique and the so-called ISIS-Core in Iraq and Syria is quite incontrovertible.” Again, however, US officials offered no hint as to what that evidence might be. Even when pushed by reporters, the State Department said very little about the nature of the ties between core IS and its Mozambican affiliate. The explanations that were offered were, at best, confusing. When asked about the ongoing lull in claims by IS of attacks by Cabo Delgado militants (the last claim was on 1 November, 2020, for an attack on southern Tanzania), State Department Counterterrorism Coordinator John Godfrey intimated that the lack of claims represented not a breakdown of the relationship between IS and the Cabo Delgado insurgency but a counterterrorism success against core IS by the US and its coalition partners. “The media wing of ISIS-Core,” he said, “has frankly been under pressure that has limited their ability to put out the kinds of statements that they normally do about the activities of ISIS-Mozambique and other branches and networks.” That claim, how-
ever, strains credulity, as any pressure on the IS media wing has not prevented the organization from claiming attacks around the world in recent months. Indeed, the group’s other affiliate in its Central African Province, based in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, released an official attack claim through IS channels as recently as this month.

Not only do the designations frame US policy on the conflict going forward, but they also shape how the US will partner with the Nyusi government going forward. The designation of Hassan — and only Hassan — as the leader of ISIS-Mozambique is arguably a gift to Nyusi. That Hassan is a Tanzanian national adds credence to Nyusi’s long-held rhetorical stance that the Cabo Delgado insurgency is primarily a foreign creation, led by non-Mozambicans and funded by unnamed outside actors. The designation is ammunition that Nyusi can use in negotiations with regional partners to pursue the border security improvements he has sought over the course of the conflict. The US later reinforced its vote of confidence in Nyusi’s approach to the conflict by announcing a Special Forces mission in the country to train Mozambican marines (the training mission will be covered in depth in the next Weekly).

The US did temper its gift with some implicit criticism of the Mozambican president’s record thus far. Godfrey called the government’s use of private military contractors counterproductive, saying it “complicates rather than helps efforts to address the terror threat” in Cabo Delgado. State Department spokesman Ned Price, speaking later, called on the Mozambican government to investigate the allegations of human rights abuses by government forces and contractors made in the recently published Amnesty International report on the Cabo Delgado conflict. Both Godfrey and Price emphasized that, under US law, US security support could only go to units that can credibly be said not to have been involved in human rights violations.

However, US officials did not address the ways the designations will affect the human rights of civilians living near the conflict zone. Analysts at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) highlighted the ways broad sanctions designations place humanitarian organizations in a bind. Some humanitarian groups — often the ones serving the most vulnerable civilians — rely on dialogue with insurgents to ensure the safety of their staff as they operate in dangerous areas. If such dialogue can open an organization up to heavy consequences from the US, it can severely limit the work that organization can accomplish. With organizations serving the nearly 670,000 civilians displaced in Cabo Delgado already so thinly-stretched, the added stress of sanctions could be a significant impediment to improved aid delivery. The CSIS experts called on the Biden administration to revoke the designations, or “at least immediately issue waivers or general licenses for humanitarian assistance” to prevent any interruption in aid delivery. The administration has not yet done so.

Beyond the immediate financial and humanitarian consequences, the designations do internationalize the Cabo Delgado conflict in a way that benefits IS. It is unlikely to escape the attention of IS propagandists that these designations proclaim that ISIS-Mozambique threatens US interests — a victory for the core group, which still seeks relevance as a major player on the world stage. If the purpose of IS franchising in Africa is to expand its struggle against the US to new theaters, the designations confirm that the strategy has succeeded in Mozambique. If the only thing that success costs the group is some potential frozen assets, it would be a bargain for IS at twice the price.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

The Mozambican government’s humanitarian and development efforts remain lacking. Civil society groups and local business leaders came together last week to criticize the slow progress of the Northern Integrated Development Agency (ADIN). As if to underline their own point, their complaints were heard at a workshop set up by ADIN to gather ideas for the agency’s strategic plan, over six months after the agency was formally launched. The workshop was part of a series to be held by the consulting team charged with drafting the strategic plan. The team is made up of prominent Frelimo supporters, led by lawyer Abdul Carimo Issá and includ-
ing a prominent researcher of the origins of the insurgency, Sheikh Saide Habibe. With strategy workshops in Niassa and Nampula provinces still to come, the strategic plan is not expected to be finished before June, with implementation to begin at some point after that. Given that ADIN was meant to offer responses to underlying drivers of instability in Cabo Delgado, the fact that the agency is unlikely to begin its programming much before the fourth anniversary of conflict’s onset is hard to see as anything but a major failure.

Among the problems ADIN might be addressing right now if it had any programming up and running is the widespread incidence of cholera among displaced people in Cabo Delgado. A doctor with Médecins Sans Frontières told a Deutsche Welle reporter that there have been as many cholera deaths in the province so far this year as there were in all of 2020. The UN has recorded over 5,000 cases and 55 deaths through 24 February. The problem has become so widespread that some people are unwilling to go to health centers in displacement centers for other ailments for fear that they will contract cholera.

ADIN might also have been working on development projects in Macomia district, where civilians are returning to a situation in which, as Macomia district administrator Tomás Badae said last week, “all the infrastructures have been vandalised.” Though the district capital has not been the target of insurgent attack in some time, it has not been rebuilt since insurgents occupied it in May 2020. Nearly all public buildings were damaged or destroyed during the occupation. Badae said that, while people are returning to the district, only 2,300 have come back to the district capital, which used to house 16,425. Despite the destruction, Badae has issued an order calling teachers employed in western Macomia district to return to the district in hopes of resuming instruction this year.

The Mozambican military hopes to turn its strategic plans into action at a much faster clip than ADIN, as President Nyusi has finally filled the opening at the top of the military hierarchy left by the death of the late armed forces chief of staff Eugenio Mussa. Last week, Nyusi tapped a naval officer, Joaquim Mangrasse, for the post, and promoted him to admiral. Like Mussa, Mangrasse has a long-standing relationship with Nyusi, as he was head of the presidential guard before his new appointment. Nyusi named Mangrasse to the post shortly after taking office in 2015. Mangrasse’s appointment as chief of staff may be an effort to smooth relations with potential foreign security partners, some of whom were reportedly made nervous by the lack of leadership at the top of the military. Mangrasse certainly has an interest in security cooperation, as he wrote a long paper on maritime security cooperation off the Mozambican coast during his time at the Mozambican military’s staff college. Nyusi also appointed Cristóvão Chume to be commander of the army and Cândido Tirano to lead the air force.

General Bertolino Capitine, the armed forces deputy chief of staff whose apparent long shot campaign to win the top job fell short last week, promised reporters that they would soon witness the return of Mozambican civilians to Mocimboa da Praia town. He set no time frame for the return, but was adamant that insurgents are not currently in the town. A video posted by Pinnacle News depicting a short bike ride through a deserted downtown Mocimboa da Praia lent credence to Capitine’s claim.

In a curious move, South African private military contractor Dyck Advisory Group (DAG) has taken its public relations campaign to the United Nations. In the same Amnesty International report referenced above, the organization accused DAG of firing indiscriminately at crowds and civilian infrastructure in its work supporting the Mozambican police fighting the Cabo Delgado insurgency. The company has promised to investigate the claims, and last week wrote a letter to UN Secretary-General António Guterres, pledging to follow the UN’s Global Compact on Human Rights. The move may have been dictated by DAG’s employers, as Mozambique intends to run for a seat on the UN Security Council this year, and employing an unrepentant mercenary outfit accused of human rights abuses would surely be a black mark on its candidacy.

Finally, a new study by the Institute of Social and Economic Studies in Mozambique finds strong evidence
that insurgent recruitment is taking place in Nampula and Niassa provinces. The study, which draws on inter-
views with people in Nampula and Niassa, says that the incentives insurgers offer to people recruited from
those provinces are more financial than ideological. The researchers highlight high wages for fighters and the
potential to remit those wages back to family in Nampula and Niassa as being the two most-cited insurgent
recruiting tools. Within the provinces, recruitment is focused on coastal Nampula and northern Niassa, along
the Tanzanian border.