Cabo Ligado Weekly: 13-19 September

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

BY THE NUMBERS

Cabo Delgado, October 2017-September 2021

- Total number of organized political violence events: 992
- Total number of reported fatalities from organized political violence: 3,306
- Total number of reported fatalities from civilian targeting: 1,492

All ACLED data are available for download via the data export tool and curated data files.

SITUATION SUMMARY

Accounts of fighting between pro-government forces and insurgents in the Messalo river valley continue to be vague due to lack of media access to the conflict, but they are consistent enough to show that combat was still ongoing in the area as of last week. For instance, fishermen who had been working off the Macomia coast arrived on Ilha Matemo on 13 September and reported major operations by pro-government helicopter gunships in the area they had just left. They abandoned their fishing, the men said, because they feared being mistaken for insurgents by the helicopters.

Some more specific accounts of incidents are available, however. Mozambican naval forces captured 20 men they alleged to be insurgents off the coast of Mocimboa da Praia town on 13 September. The men denied the allegations, saying that they were on their way to Palma. The confusion over the captured men’s relationship to the insurgency is a microcosm of a larger problem in the conflict. According to a new investigation by the Mozambican newspaper Ikweli, a group of alleged insurgents that Mozambican forces had captured in July 2021 and displayed for a television news broadcast were not insurgents at all. Instead, they were civilians from Monjane, Palma district who were caught up in a roundup as Mozambican forces prepared for the arrival of Rwandan troops in Palma. Some of those shown on Mozambican national television in July have since been released, but others remain in custody. It is not clear what, if any, due process protections people arrested in these roundups are afforded.

In their announcement of the Mocimboa da Praia arrests, Mozambican forces also offered commentary on the process of searching Mocimboa da Praia town for materials left behind by insurgents. Mozambican and Rwandan troops are conducting house-by-house searches of the town — completing between 50 and 60 houses each day — but not finding much. As of 13 September, they had only recovered two weapons and some ammunition.
In the Nacaca resettlement center in Ancuabe district, displaced civilians staged a demonstration on 15 September to protest irregularities in the distribution of food aid. The local disbursement of World Food Programme (WFP) aid vouchers for September and October was carried out earlier in the month, and disbursement at Nacaca was marred by the same distribution list inconsistencies that have been noted throughout Cabo Delgado. Many displaced families found themselves excluded from the list, while locals were observed receiving food aid vouchers meant for displaced people. Some protesters attempted to assault workers involved in food aid distribution, but the groups were separated by police.

In Namaluco, Quissanga district, insurgents waylaid six civilians who were involved in brewing alcohol on 16 September, killing five of them. One was able to escape and report the attack. Civilians in the area reported increased concern about being targeted by small groups of insurgents moving south, away from joint force operations in the Messalo river valley. Yet more evidence of such groups shortly followed, when 15 insurgents surrendered to Mozambican forces near Quiterajo in Macomia district on or around 17 September. The fighters reported that life within the insurgency is chaotic, and desertion levels are high.

That chaos is also reflected in reports from civilians who recently escaped insurgent custody. One group of nine women and girls arrived in Macomia town on 13 September, followed by a group of over 30 on 15 September. Some had been held captive by the insurgency for over two years. Relatives of the former captives said they had been released from insurgent camps due to a combination of threats to the camps from pro-government forces and lack of supplies in the camps. The supply issues were echoed by other women who escaped insurgent custody in August, many of whom were sent to a Pemba hospital due to malnutrition. Some also reported that the women and girls experienced sexual abuse in captivity, including forced marriage.

INCIDENT FOCUS: IMPROVISED EXPLOSIVE DEVICES (IEDS)

New information emerged last week about the 12 September landmine attack on a Rwandan Ratel infantry fighting vehicle in southern Mocimboa da Praia district. According to a spokesman for the Rwandan Defence Force (RDF), a landmine exploded under the RDF vehicle, but did no damage beyond destroying the vehicle’s tires. There were no casualties, according to the spokesman, and the vehicle was repaired. A munitions expert told Cabo Ligado that a TM-62 anti-vehicle mine — a type Mozambique once had in its armory and may still have — would likely do far more damage to an armored personnel carrier than what the spokesman described. Ratels, however, have been known to survive hits from smaller anti-vehicle mines. No photographs of the damage are available.

Joint Mozambican-Rwandan forces have also discovered IEDs in southern Mocimboa da Praia district, although none have been detonated by insurgents yet. One such IED, pictured in a press report, consists of a mortar shell connected to a package of densely-packed powder which experts believe to be ammonium nitrate, a fertilizer that can also serve as a powerful explosive. The apparatus was attached to a remote detonator set to work off of a radio signal. So far, all such IEDs have been detected and disarmed by soldiers before they detonated, which is perhaps a reflection of the insurgency’s limited experience in both making and using the devices. Elements of the RDF have also received counter-IED training from the US military as recently as 2019. Mozambican Defense Minister Jaime Neto denied any knowledge of landmine or IED use by the insurgents. Neto’s ministry earlier denied allegations that Mozambican forces were using anti-vehicle landmines in Muidume district.

Building up an IED capacity while fragmenting in the face of pro-government military pressure is a difficult task for the insurgency, and there will likely be missteps along the way. A hint of one such misstep comes from a single-sourced, unconfirmed report from Nangade district on 20 September, suggesting that as many as 30 insurgents were killed in an accidental explosion in the district. Accidental detonations are a frequent occurrence for inexperienced bombmakers. Even with these setbacks, however, the reports of IEDs in the field do
suggest that the insurgency has secured both necessary supplies and a basic understanding of how to make IEDs. If insurgents can grow their supply and expertise, their capacity to threaten Mozambican and foreign troops alike will be greatly expanded.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

Indications about the government’s plans for displaced civilians remain mixed as the rainy season nears. Mozambican Police Chief Bernardino Rafael was in Pemba on 16 September, where he delivered a speech urging police to assist displaced people in returning to their homes. He brought with him 11 trucks for the provincial police force, saying that the trucks will “facilitate the movement of citizens” and that displaced people “are all going [to go] back” to their communities of origin. He particularly urged people to return to Quissanga district, which has been the target of low-level insurgent attacks recently, saying that it is important to restart fishing in the district.

Government officials also began signing up people in Pemba who are displaced from Mocimboa da Praia town last week for a scheme to move them back to Mocimboa da Praia. The people who registered were told that they will initially be sent to Mangoma, a village on the N380 just west of Mocimboa da Praia town. There, they will wait for joint Mozambican-Rwandan forces to finish their house-by-house search of Mocimboa da Praia town before the civilians can complete their trip home. As of 18 September, those who had signed up were awaiting transportation to Mangoma.

Yet, despite these indications that the government expects returns at at least a moderate scale, some displaced people who cannot access government programs in Pemba are making plans to remain in place for the long term. Residents in the Marokani resettlement center in Ancuabe district are reportedly selling recently distributed food aid to acquire materials to build long-term homes. Most of the existing buildings at Marokani are little more than tarps, which would be less of a hardship if the residents believed they would be leaving before the rainy season. Yet the decision to sell off much-needed food for building materials suggests that many see themselves living in the camp for the foreseeable future — or at least through the rainy summer months in which a tarp will provide relatively little protection from the elements.

Indeed, some displaced people living far from the provincial capital are actively calling on the government to help them return home as soon as possible. Displaced people in Namatil, Mueda district have not yet received their bi-monthly WFP food aid disbursement, and complain of both food shortages and lack of access to clean drinking water. They have gone to local government representatives in hopes of speeding their return to their home communities, if only to ameliorate their current living conditions.

There is some positive news about the coming rainy season for people stuck in resettlement centers: the coming season is likely to be less rainy than most. Mozambique’s meteorological service announced its rainy season projections last week, and said that the country’s northern provinces would likely experience lower than normal rainfall between January and March 2022. The projections also said that the north “may experience long periods without rain and/or below normal rain” this rainy season. In addition to reducing the suffering of some in temporary housing, that forecast may increase mobility in the province for both pro-government forces and insurgents during the rainy season. Depending on the overall reduction in rainfall, however, it might also harm agricultural production in Cabo Delgado.

In Palma, health services came back online last week, with government healthcare providers arriving in the town on 14 September. Mozambican Health Minister Armando Tiago was in Palma last week, where he promised that medicines to supply the health center there are on their way and said that his ministry would soon provide a new ambulance for the district capital.
On the international front, the European Union Training Mission (EUTM) in Mozambique kicked off last week, with EUTM commander Nuno Lemos Pires meeting with Mozambican President Filipe Nyusi. The mission has a two year mandate to train Mozambican navy and army special forces units in counterterrorism operations.

Zimbabwe is also on the cusp of sending military trainers to Mozambique. According to a report in Zimbabwean media, roughly 300 troops are standing by to be deployed as trainers in Mozambique, but are awaiting the signing of a Status of Forces Agreement between Zimbabwe and Mozambique. The nature of the sticking point on the agreement is unclear, particularly as Mozambique has acknowledged Zimbabwean training forces in the country earlier this year. It is also unclear why a second agreement is necessary, given that there is an existing agreement to cover the Southern African Development Community Standby Force Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM), of which the Zimbabwean deployment would notionally be a part. Given these inconsistencies, and the fact that the purported training deployment would dwarf the EUTM and recent training programs from US forces, it is possible that the Zimbabwean mandate extends beyond conducting training outside the conflict zone.

The heads of military intelligence for East African Community (EAC) member states, which includes Rwanda and Tanzania but not Mozambique, met last week in Kigali for a regional summit. Though no Southern African Development Community (SADC) observer was mentioned in public announcements about the meeting, it still offered a chance for coordination between Rwanda and SADC through Tanzania, which retains membership in both SADC and EAC.
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**IEDs Discovered in Cabo Delgado**
Joint Mozambican-Rwandan forces have discovered improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in southern Mocimboa da Praia district, although none have been detonated by insurgents yet. One such IED consisted of a mortar shell connected to a package of densely-packed powder which experts believe to be ammonium nitrate, a fertilizer that can also serve as a powerful explosive. The apparatus was then attached to a remote detonator set to work off of a radio signal. So far, all such IEDs have been detected and disarmed by soldiers before they detonated, which is perhaps a reflection of the insurgency's limited experience in both making and using the devices.

**Small Insurgent Groups Moving South**
In Namaluco, Quissanga district, insurgents waylaid six civilians on 16 September, killing five of them. One was able to escape and report the attack. Civilians in the area reported increased concern about being targeted by small groups of insurgents moving south, away from joint force operations in the Messalo river valley. Yet more evidence of such groups shortly followed, when 15 insurgents surrendered to Mozambican forces near Quiterajo in Macomia district on or around 17 September. The fighters reported that life within the insurgency is chaotic, and desertion levels are high.

**Organized Political Violence in Cabo Delgado (1 JAN 2020 - 17 SEP 2021)**

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**NOTE:** Some events from this coverage period will be included in next week’s infographic due to reporting delays.