Both the Cabo Delgado insurgency and the Islamic State’s (IS) attempt to include the insurgency’s attacks in its global narrative returned to center stage last week. Insurgents and pro-government forces fought across the conflict zone, while IS released 18 claims of recent insurgent attacks. The claims will be discussed in depth in this report’s Incident Focus section.

The week opened with an insurgent attack on Lijungo, about five kilometers south of Nangade town in Nangade district, on 8 November. No details of the attack are available, although witnesses reported that both Mozambican and SAMIM forces mobilized to pursue the attackers.

The next day, those pro-government troops caught up with the insurgents who had attacked Lijungo in the forest near the village of Samora Machel, also in Nangade district. There, the troops ambushed insurgents, killing three of them.

Also on 9 November, there was a clash between insurgents and pro-government forces at Mandimba, in eastern Nangade district. A joint force made up of troops from the Mozambican army and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Standby Force Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM) ambushed a group of insurgents walking near the Ruvuma river on the morning of 9 November. In the resulting firefight, four insurgents were killed.

The same day, insurgents arrived in Litingina, Nangade district. Civilians living in the village saw them coming and fled. There are no reports of casualties nor estimates yet available of looting or property damage.

Further south, on 10 November, insurgents struck at the village of 5º Congresso in northern Macomia district,
where two insurgents surrendered to government forces just two weeks ago. Insurgents killed one civilian in the village, burned homes, and looted food and other supplies. IS later issued a claim of the attack, asserting that the man killed had been a pro-government spy. Local sources, however, say that the man did not collaborate with either side, and was simply attempting to farm near the village when he was killed.

Mozambican soldiers, SAMIM troops, and local militias all launched a search for the 5º Congresso attackers, with the military forces using helicopters for surveillance. In the end, though, it was a local militia that ended up ambushng the insurgents near Chai shortly after the attack, killing six of them.

On 12 November, local militia killed another four people in 5º Congresso believed to be members of the insurgency.

On 13 November, a group of over 30 insurgents attacked Nanjaba, a village in Macomia district roughly 15 kilometers from Macomia town. The insurgents burned at least 17 homes in the village, and at least three civilians died in the fires. The attackers stole a great deal of food, which was available because families in the area had received a disbursement of food aid earlier that day.

The Nanjaba attack underscores both the dangers of displaced civilians returning to conflict-affected districts and the limited nature of government security gains in those districts. The 13 November attack took place just over a year to the day after insurgents last raided Nanjaba, on 5 November 2020. In the last attack, insurgents killed two civilians and kidnapped another six before burning down nearly every building in the village. To have more killings and fires targeting the buildings that had been rebuilt in the intervening year demonstrates how vulnerable Macomia district civilians remain to insurgent violence despite the ostensible security gains made by the government in the intervening period. At a time when more civilians are returning to conflict-affected districts and aid organizations are attempting to provide them with food and other necessities, that vulnerability will likely lead to more attacks as insurgents work to remedy their supply issues by looting civilian goods.

Also on 13 November, a group of 12 men believed to be insurgents killed a moto taxi driver near Namatil, in far northern Mueda district on the road toward Tanzania. The men killed the driver with machetes and stole his motorcycle, but left a woman passenger unharmed.

New information about earlier incidents also came to light last week. According to a SAMIM press release, an operation by regional forces on 24 October destroyed three insurgent bases in northern Macomia district. The release claimed that SAMIM troops rescued 13 civilians — eight women and five children — and recovered firearms and rocket-propelled grenades. It also noted that insurgents fleeing the SAMIM advance ran north across the Messalo River — an apparent dig at Rwandan troops, who earlier seemed to complain that insurgents were escaping south across the Messalo into Macomia district and not being caught by their SAMIM counterparts. The release also poses a problem for the Mozambican government’s account of the conflict, as then-army chief (and newly-appointed Minister of Defense) Cristovao Chume declared on 13 October that pro-government forces had dismantled all insurgent bases.

On 1 November, at the village of Michee in Lindi district of Lindi region, to the north of Mtwara region in Tanzania, unidentified armed men believed to be Tanzania Intelligence and Security Services officers abducted five men in a series of late night house raids. Police deny any knowledge of the raids, but the opposition political party Civic United Front claims that the people taken were its members. It is not clear if the abductions are related to the Cabo Delgado conflict, but they bear a striking similarity to previous Tanzanian state operations against people believed to be working with Islamist armed groups in the country.

On 7 November, 13 women who had escaped from insurgent custody were found in Macomia district on the
road between Litamanda and Chai. Like other recent escapees, the women reported that insurgents in the area are scattered and having a difficult time finding enough food to eat.

Also on 7 November, insurgents attacked the village of Ntuleni, between Palma and Mocimboa da Praia towns in Palma district. The insurgents killed one civilian, burned homes, and stole cassava that civilians had been saving to eat. A combined force of Mozambican and Rwandan soldiers responded to the attack, tracking the attackers with drones. The combined force eventually cornered the insurgent raiding party, killing nine of them.

INCIDENT FOCUS: IS ATTACK CLAIMS

After a period of relative quiet, IS began to issue claims for attacks in Mozambique at an unprecedented rate last week. Below is a list of the claims, followed by a discussion of what the sudden proliferation of claims means for the conflict.

- The earliest incident claimed was on 24 July of this year, in which IS refers to an attack by what it calls the “African Crusader coalition” on an insurgent position at Awasse, Mocimboa da Praia district. The claim describes a spirited defense of Awasse by insurgents over two days in which they killed and injured “a large number” of pro-government forces before ultimately withdrawing. The claim lines up fairly closely with what we know of the joint Mozambican-Rwandan assault on Awasse, which took place somewhere between 22 and 26 July and resulted in Rwandan casualties and eventual pro-government control of the village.

- On 29 July, according to a claim, insurgents clashed with joint Mozambican-Rwandan forces at Namalala, southern Palma district. The claim says that fighting lasted an hour and that insurgents damaged two armored vehicles and killed an unknown number of soldiers before withdrawing. ACLED records no incident corresponding to that description.

- On 4 August, according to a claim, insurgents ambushed joint Mozambican-Rwandan troops in the neighborhood of Unidade, in northern Mocimboa da Praia town along the road to Palma. According to the claim, insurgents damaged a tank and killed an unknown number of soldiers to withdraw. ACLED has not recorded any incident matching this particular description, but the larger conflict for Mocimboa da Praia town was ongoing at the time and few details have emerged.

- On 20 August, according to a claim, insurgents targeted SAMIM troops in an attack on a position in Naquitengue, near Mbau in southern Mocimboa da Praia district. IS said that insurgents killed and wounded a number of SAMIM troops and destroyed SAMIM vehicles before withdrawing in the face of a counterattack by aircraft. Rwandan troops reported a battle with insurgents at Naquitengue on 20 August, but said that they killed 13 insurgents while not reporting any casualties of their own.

- The next day, according to a claim, insurgents detonated explosive devices on a road in “Ichitonda” (believed to be Chitunda, Muidumbe district), destroying two armored vehicles from the pro-government coalition and killing soldiers. ACLED records no incident corresponding to that description.

- On 1 September, according to a claim, insurgents ambushed pro-government forces on a road in southern Mocimboa da Praia district, killing a number of soldiers. ACLED records no incident corresponding to that description, but there were reports of fighting in southern Mocimboa da Praia district in that period that contained little detail.

- On 5 September, according to a claim, insurgents ambushed pro-government forces on a road outside of Mbau in southern Mocimboa da Praia district. The insurgents reportedly detonat-
an explosive on the road and then followed up with gunfire, destroying an armored vehicle and killing soldiers. ACLED records a landmine attack on Rwandan forces followed by gunfire on a road outside of Mbau on 12 September, but no casualties were reported for that attack.

- On 7 September, according to a claim, insurgents ambushed pro-government forces on a road in southern Mocimboa da Praia district. The claim asserts that insurgents killed multiple soldiers in the gunfire. ACLED records no incident corresponding to that description, but there were reports of fighting in southern Mocimboa da Praia district in that period that contained little detail.

- On 20 September, according to a claim, insurgents attacked a barracks for pro-government forces outside of Mocimboa da Praia town, killing soldiers and seizing weapons. ACLED records no incident corresponding to that description.

- On 28 September, according to a claim, insurgents killed a civilian in a village in the Quiterajo administrative post in northeastern Macomia district. ACLED records no incident corresponding to that description.

- On 2 October, according to a claim, pro-government forces ambushed insurgents on a road in southern Mocimboa da Praia district, but the insurgents managed to inflict casualties on the ambushers before escaping. Mozambican police claimed a successful roadside ambush of insurgents took place 6 October, killing two insurgents.

- On 13 October, according to a claim, insurgents clashed with a convoy of pro-government troops near “Namabe” (possibly Namande, Muidumbe district). The battle lasted two days, the claim said, and pro-government forces suffered multiple casualties. ACLED records no incident corresponding to that description.

- On 10 November, according to a claim, insurgents fought a Mozambican army patrol at “Moiihi” (possibly Mueia) in Nangade district, eventually driving off the Mozambicans and capturing their weapons. ACLED records no incident corresponding to that description.

- Also on 10 November according to a claim, insurgents fought a Mozambican army patrol at “Legogo” (possibly Lijungo), Nangade district, killing one soldier. As noted above, there are reports of a 8 November attack on Lijungo, with no details available.

- Also on 10 November, according to a claim, insurgents assassinated a civilian spy at 5º Congresso, Macomia district. As noted above, the assassination did take place, but there is no evidence that the man killed collaborated with the government.

- On 11 November, according to a claim, insurgents fought with Mozambican army troops at Chai, Macomia district, killing one soldier and seizing weapons. As noted above, insurgents clashed with a local militia in Chai on 10 November, resulting in six insurgent deaths.

- According to a 12 November claim, insurgents captured and killed three Mozambican soldiers in Namatil, Mueda district. ACLED records no incident corresponding to that description, although, as noted in the section above, insurgents were active in Namatil the next day.

- According to a 14 November claim, insurgents captured and beheaded two civilians it accused of spying for Mozambican forces in Ngapa, in northern Mueda district. ACLED has not received any other reports of this incident, but the claim includes images of the beheadings, lending credence to the claim.
Though many of the claims do not line up clearly with incidents recorded by ACLED, most are still quite believable. Most claimed attacks took place in the battle for Mocimboa da Praia district, during which there was very little media access and news organizations were forced to rely on claims from the Mozambican and Rwandan governments and SAMIM to understand what was going on.

The geographic distribution of the more recent claims indicates the insurgency’s current areas of strength. The claims offer no sense that insurgents are currently attempting to contest control of Mocimboa da Praia district. Instead are operating at the weak margins of the pro-government coalition positions, both in Macomia district (where civilians and supplies are becoming more readily available) and in northern Nangade and Mueda districts, where population density is low and the Tanzanian border provides some sanctuary.

In terms of the text of the claims, there is a marked shift from the earlier claims to the later ones. In the earlier claims — the ones covering the battle for Mocimboa da Praia district — the text tends to focus on the pro-government international coalition, or what IS calls the “African Crusader coalition.” Since the start of November, however, IS has not claimed any attacks against the coalition. Instead, all of its claims name either the Mozambican military or civilians deemed to be spies for the Mozambican government. That may reflect a tactical decision — insurgents are much more likely to prevail in combat against relatively poorly trained and equipped Mozambican troops than foreign intervenors. It may also, however, reflect a strategic shift away from an earlier attempt to demonstrate insurgent strength by standing up to intervenors directly.

IS offered a short explanation for the long delay between Mozambique claims, saying that the four months between claims was due to “technical and operational circumstances.” It is unclear what that means, and the earlier claims in this most recent batch only make the gap more puzzling. IS last made a series of claims in Mozambique in late July, claiming incidents that took place as late as 31 July. Yet in this new group of claims, the earliest incident dates to 24 July, suggesting that there was some silo on the Cabo Delgado side that prevented the earlier claim from getting through. Clearly, however, whatever was broken in the link between Cabo Delgado insurgents and the IS media office has been fixed for now.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

For civilians hoping to return to Mocimboa da Praia district soon, there was good news last week in the form of civil servants beginning to arrive in Mocimboa da Praia town. A group of district government administrative staff and nurses left Mueda for Mocimboa da Praia on 10 November, becoming the first group of what is expected to be a larger effort to get district services up and running quickly.

For displaced people still living on the edges of the conflict zone, however, the wait to return home is growing ever tenser. In Nacaca, Ancuabe district, displaced people who have set up farms in hopes of achieving a measure of self-sufficiency report that locals are demanding a cut of their harvest or the proceeds from it. The locals are backing up their demands with threats that the displaced people will be removed from aid distribution lists and even arrested if they complain. Recently, there were protests against food aid irregularities at Nacaca; locals complain that those irregularities continue.

In Maputo, the big news from last week was the turnover in leadership of Mozambique’s security ministries. Mozambican President Filipe Nyusi fired his Defense Minister, Jaime Neto, and his Interior Minister, Amade Miquidade, early in the week, shortly thereafter replacing them with Cristovao Chume and Arsénia Massingue, respectively. Chume, an army general, had been the head of the Mozambican army, while Massingue had led Servico Nacional de Migracao, Mozambique’s immigration service.

At a speech following the dismissals, Nyusi pledged to restructure Mozambique’s security sector. Offering some specifics at Chume’s swearing in, Nyusi said that Chume’s priorities should include increasing collaboration between the military and local militias in Cabo Delgado, improving the performance and capabilities
of Mozambique’s border guards, and preparing to provide security in Cabo Delgado once foreign interventions in the province end. That list of goals speaks to Nyusi’s strategy for improving security in Cabo Delgado, but it also reflects the president’s overall security agenda. A former defense minister himself, Nyusi’s time as president has been in large part ending the threat of a Renamo insurgency — traditionally the job of Mozambique’s police force — and then shifting overall responsibility for national security from the police to the country’s under-resourced military. Nyusi has already moved responsibility for the overall counterinsurgency effort in Cabo Delgado from the police to the military. His preference for the military is expressed further in his goal for Chume of shifting control of local militias from the police to the defense ministry, which would further strengthen the military’s hold on counterinsurgency operations in Cabo Delgado.

Police are not being wholly left behind, however. In a speech on 11 November, Mozambican police chief Bernardino Rafael (who was a favorite to replace Miquidade but did not get the job) announced that Rwandan trainers would launch a program for Mozambican police and soldiers aimed at creating a force capable of performing both counterterrorism operations and stopping the rash of kidnappings targeting business people and doctors in Mozambique in recent months. It is not clear how the new unit will be organized or where it will sit in Mozambique’s overall security structure.

On the international front, Tanzanian President Samia Suluhu Hassan addressed Cabo Delgado last week in her speech to an annual meeting of Tanzanian military leaders in Dar es Salaam. She praised the Tanzanian military for its work on both sides of the border with Mozambique, saying that special forces on the border have “allowed things to return to normal, socially and economically.” She emphasized Mozambique and Tanzania’s shared history in Mozambique’s liberation struggle, and reiterated Tanzania’s commitment to participating in SAMIM. Perhaps most notably (and in language similar to that used by her Mozambican counterpart), Hassan urged military leaders to make counterterrorism a top priority and pledged to make the civilian branches of government do the same. In an already extremely securitized country, a stronger focus on terrorism is likely a recipe for increased state repression.
Nyusi Pursues Greater Role for Military

Mozambican President Filipe Nyusi’s pledge to restructure the country’s security services reflects the president’s overall security agenda. A former defense minister himself, Nyusi’s time as president has been spent in large part ending the threat of a Renamo insurgency – traditionally the job of Mozambique’s police force – and then shifting overall responsibility for national security from the police to the country’s under-resourced military. Nyusi has already moved responsibility for the overall counterinsurgency effort in Cabo Delgado from the police to the military. His preference for the military is expressed further in his goal of shifting control of local militias from the police to the defense ministry, which would further strengthen the military’s hold on counterinsurgency operations in Cabo Delgado.

IS Attack Claims Mostly on Periphery

The geographical distribution of the more recent Islamic State (IS) claims indicates the insurgency’s current areas of strength. The claims offer no sense that insurgents are currently attempting to contest control of Mocimboa da Praia district. Instead, they are operating at the weak margins of the pro-government coalition positions. This is true both in Macomia district, where civilians and supplies are becoming more readily available, and in northern Nangombe and Mueda districts, where population density is low and the Tanzanian border provides some sanctuary.

Organized Political Violence in Cabo Delgado (1 JAN 2020 - 12 NOV 2021)

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