**Actor Profile: Local Forces**  
*The Communal Militias of Mozambique*

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

## INTRODUCTION

Communal militias emerged spontaneously, if sporadically, in Cabo Delgado in 2018, as communities sought to defend themselves against insurgent attacks. Widely referred to as Local Forces, their activity spiked in the second half of 2021 (see graph below) in the wake of the arrival of international intervention forces and the consequent break up of the insurgents into smaller, more mobile groups. Violence involving communal militias has also seen wider diffusion since this time. Between 2018 and 2020, these militias had been involved in violent incidents in just four districts. Since 2021, ACLED records communal militia activity in 10 of the province’s 17 districts.
These groups emerged to confront the insurgents and are affiliated in different ways with the state or the ruling party, Frelimo. Nevertheless, their emergence has presented the state with a significant challenge. The breakdown in the province’s already weak governance, brought about by the conflict and lack of popular trust in the Defense and Security Forces (FDS), created a space in which the militias could arise. However, they have not developed to a point where they present a threat to local authorities, and there is no evidence that they have become the instruments of political actors in the province. This is at least partly due to political efforts to control such groups’ actions locally, define their loyalty to the state through high-level rhetoric, and create an enabling framework for them to be subsumed under the military formally as Local Forces.

This profile uses ACLED data and other sources to examine Local Forces’ origins, growth, and areas of operation in Cabo Delgado province. It concludes with an assessment of their place in the security sector and the wider implications for Mozambique of the recently enacted Local Forces legislative framework.

**ORIGINS**

Given the insurgents’ focus on targeting civilians, particularly in the conflict’s early years, the emergence of communal militias was perhaps inevitable. Early records of their emergence reflected ad hoc, reactive mobilization. For example, in June 2018, ACLED records civilians organizing and arming themselves with traditional weapons in defense of Macomia town, which at the time feared attack. Frelimo led this early mobilization. Similar mobilization occurred in Nangade district in December 2018, where these groups had some initial success, capturing a suspected insurgency leader in the district, Mustafa Suale Machinga. Across 2018 and 2019, ACLED records just five political violence events involving such militias.

Though the level of incidents was low, there was an emerging demand from former fighters in the liberation war and their representatives to be involved in operations against the insurgency. In 2019, former combatants with experience in the liberation war and civil war approached the District Administrator in Nangade requesting weapons. In Muidumbe, emergent village self-defense groups began collaborating with the FDS in 2020, first as guides, but soon demanded firearms, according to a local source. A similar process occurred in Palma district. The militias grew significantly in the months following the arrival of the Rwanda Security Forces (RSF) and the Southern Africa Development Community Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM) in the second half of 2021, concentrated in northern Macomia, Nangade, Palma, Muidumbe, Mueda, and Mocímboa da Praia districts.

**Relationship with the State**

Most participants in these militias have some loyalty to Frelimo, though their relationship with the state is not unproblematic. In Nangade, they were established by former fighters in the liberation and civil wars. However, though clearly loyal to the state, their request for arms was due to their perception of the failure of state forces to protect them. The process was similar in Palma and Muidumbe, where community leaders mobilized in self-defense before negotiating the supply of basic armaments from the FDS.

People involved in local militias tend to be veterans of the liberation war, demobilized soldiers who had fought in the civil war, and ordinary citizens who wished to resist the violent insurgency. Priority in

---

1 Moçambique para todos, ‘FDS em risco de perder o controlo da situação em Cabo Delgado… Catanas, arcos e flechas para vigilância,’ 15 June 2018
2 Club of Mozambique, ‘Alleged leader of Nangade insurgents captured,’ 10 December 2018
3 Field Notes, Community Reporter in Nangade, 24 October 2023
4 Field Notes, Community Reporter in Nangade, 24 October 2023
5 Field Notes, Community Reporter in Nangade, 24 October 2023
6 Field Notes, Community Reporter in Mocimboa da Praia, 24 October 2023; Field Notes, Community Reporter in Nangade; Field Notes, Community Reporter in Macomia, 22 October 2023
recruitment has been given to former fighters, their relatives, those connected to Frelimo, or individuals who can be vouched for by such people. As the state has been the source of their arms, militias have only formed in areas where Frelimo has some strength. Therefore, they are found in northern Macomia, Muidumbe, and Mueda districts, where there are predominantly Makonde populations and where Frelimo support is stronger. Conversely, they are not found in coastal Macomia and do not recruit so much in Mocímboa da Praia town. Both of these areas are dominated by Mwani people, have greater Renamo support, and are home to some insurgency leaders.

For the state and Frelimo, it has been important to stress their closeness to the militias and their historical continuity with the liberation struggle. The first high-profile engagement of such militias as a conflict actor was in October 2020 when military sources claimed that a joint operation by the FDS and a Mueda district militia had routed insurgents in Awasse in neighboring Mocímboa da Praia district. They claimed that these forces killed 270 insurgents. The military presented no evidence for the operation. The local militia was led, though perhaps not in the field, by then-74-year-old Valentim Naveta Ngalonga. Naveta is a veteran of the liberation war who was awarded the Order of Eduardo Mondlane in the third degree by President Samora Machel in June 1985.

In July 2021, the Association of Combatants of the National Liberation Struggle (ACLLIN) delivered basic supplies to “the local force” in Mueda on behalf of President Filipe Nyusi and stressed their role in the resistance to the insurgency. Seven months later, President Nyusi himself visited Mueda to present service medals to 235 members of the Local Force.

The only militia to have emerged that has not been state-sponsored in some way was the Naparama militia. The group emerged in November 2022 in Balama and Namuno districts in the south of Cabo Delgado province. Their emergence followed the short-lived expansion of insurgent activity in those districts. The group had its cultural roots in the Naparama militia that emerged in the 1980s in Zambezia and Nampula provinces, siding with Frelimo, but independent of the party. The group relied on traditional weapons rather than firearms. As a distinct conflict actor, the Naparama were short-lived. Nevertheless, Frelimo took steps to draw them close and authorized some of their activities, such as manning checkpoints in Balama district.

Structure and Formalization

The militias have developed hierarchical structures, according to local sources, but these can vary. In northern Macomia, the force is understood to be led by a former combatant based in Ceta village in the Chai Administrative Post area, with sub-units in neighboring villages. Similarly, in Nangade, it is understood that there is one overall commander in Nangade district headquarters, with units in villages across the district. In contrast, Mocímboa da Praia has three units. These are in the district headquarters, in Awasse in the west of the district, and in Quelimane, north of the district headquarters, near Palma district.

The structure in Mocímboa da Praia reflects the government’s unwillingness to arm communities in areas

---

7 Field Notes, Community Reporter in Mocimboa da Praia, 24 October 2023
8 Field Notes, Community Reporter in Mocimboa da Praia, 24 October 2023; Field Notes, Community Reporter in Nangade; Field Notes, Community Reporter in Macomia, 22 October 2023
9 Carta de Moçambique, ‘Operação de abate de 270 terroristas em Mocímboa da Praia foi liderada por um ancião de 80 anos de idade,’ 27 October 2020
10 “Pedro Jorge Castro, “Estou pronto!” Chefe Naveta, um dos mais temidos veteranos de guerra moçambicanos, pede armas para ir matar os “malfeitores”,’ Observador, 23 April 2021
11 Radio Mozambique, ‘C, Delgado: SG da ACLLIN encoraja veteranos da luta de libertação a combaterem sem trégua os terroristas,’ 19 July 2021
12 Tom Bowker, ‘Nyusi reitera “momento decisivo” no combate ao terrorismo,’ 4 February 2022, Voz de Cabo Delgado
13 Televisão de Moçambique, ‘Os Naparamas Matam 11 Alshababes no Distrito de Balama Provincia de C. Delgado,’ 1 December 2022
14 Field Notes, Community Reporter in Macomia, Mocímboa da Praia, and Nangade districts, 22-24 October 2023
not considered supportive of Frelimo, such as communities on the coast. This is a corollary of the forces initially emerging from demands from former combatants to be armed in self-defense, who are naturally associated with Frelimo. This division can be seen as ethnic — the Makonde community dominates the militias — but reflects a range of complex political, economic, and social characteristics that have developed ethnic associations.

By early 2022, Minister for National Defense Cristóvão Chume publically recognized the need to regulate these militias as Local Forces. In Mueda, Frelimo could exert political control on these militias. Their rapid spread in areas with weaker state and party presence due to the insurgency presented a difficulty and a potential threat. Noting how these groups had “emerged spontaneously to protect... their communities,” he also acknowledged that they needed to be regulated. By early 2022, Minister Chume publically recognized the need to regulate these militias as Local Forces. In Mueda, Frelimo could exert political control on these militias. Their rapid spread in areas with weaker state and party presence due to the insurgency presented a difficulty and a potential threat. Noting how these groups had “emerged spontaneously to protect... their communities,” he also acknowledged that they needed to be regulated. Later that year, in April 2022, Minister Chume promised regulation of such forces, stressing the term ‘Local Forces’ rather than ‘militias.’ He noted their advantages being their ability to provide security in areas where the FDS can not, a role he envisaged them playing until security sector reform had progressed. Promised regulation, he said, would give the state the necessary control over these forces.

In December 2022, Mozambique’s parliament approved a proposal to amend the 2019 legislation governing the Defense Armed Forces of Mozambique (FADM). The Council of Ministers finally approved this amendment with Decree 15/2023 in April 2023. The rapid growth of militia activity from a low base justified this step.

### ACTIVITY AND AREA OF OPERATION

Between 2018, 2019, and 2020, ACLED records just 13 political violence events involving communal militias. For the first two years, there were sporadic incidents in Nangade, Macomia, and Mocímboa da Praia districts (see maps below). They typically involved locally organized groups acting reactively to insurgent attacks or movements.

---

**Local Forces’ Involvement in Political Violence in Cabo Delgado**

---

**Local Forces’ Involvement in Political Violence in Cabo Delgado**

---

15 Chatham House, ‘Interview with H.E. Cristóvão Artur Chume, defence minister of Mozambique,’ 6 April 2022
16 Chatham House, ‘Interview with H.E. Cristóvão Artur Chume, defence minister of Mozambique,’ 6 April 2022
17 Boletim da República Publicação Oficial da República de Moçambique, ‘I Série — Número 72,’ 14 April 2023
The militias’ actions spiked in the wake of international intervention. The RSF arrived in July 2021 under a bilateral agreement with Mozambique. SAMIM deployed to the province the following month. After involvement in just eight political violence events in 2020, this rose to 30 events in 2021, followed by 47 in 2022. The rate of events, however, fell just as dramatically in 2023, which saw just 14 events in its first five months and none between June and October. This decline followed the overall decline in political violence events in the province in 2023.

This initial spike in incidents involving militias and the subsequent decline as insurgency activity also declined is consistent with what is known of the role of such militias in counter-insurgency. Local militias have the advantage of local knowledge of terrain, insurgent leadership, and insurgency support networks. This advantage can allow for intelligence-led approaches that can concentrate resources and disrupt relations with communities from which support may be drawn for an insurgency.\(^\text{18}\) This advantage was not just a help to foreign forces, but also to the FADM, which has openly acknowledged that its own lack of

knowledge of “beliefs, customs, taboos, [and] culture” in Cabo Delgado has handicapped its response.

Though involved in a relatively small number of political violence incidents, their role in the conflict has not been insignificant. In Nangade district, they were involved in 16 clashes in 2022 alone. This number includes independent clashes with insurgents themselves, as well as joint operations with other forces such as SAMIM. They have also provided critical support to operations, such as in northern Macomia, where they were credited locally with securing some villages in May 2022.

Moreover, they engage in regular security activities outside operations. As well as patrolling — which is ongoing — they have in the past provided escort to vehicles on certain roads, such as the Palma-Mueda route, a practice that was a source of income for an otherwise unpaid militia.

The relationship between the militias and Frelimo strengthens the prospects for their formalization as Local Forces. The formalization process has started in Nangade district with a process involving an assessment of their activities, headcount, and issuance of papers by officials from Maputo to recognize them as a Local Force under the legislation. Such a process is likely to be repeated in other areas where the militias are active.

Formalizing the militias as Local Force will be critical for security sector reform. In Mocímboa da Praia, Palma districts, and in northern Macomia district, the militias have already become part of the security infrastructure. Successfully maintaining them will depend on the FADM's ability to effectively command them, as laid out in the legislation.

Local Forces have thus far provided the state with legitimacy in some communities where perhaps underperformance by the FDS highlighted where it was lacking. Formalization will recognize that. However, their small success also highlights the areas, such as in coastal Macomia and in Mocímboa da Praia town, where communities have not mobilized in such a way and where state legitimacy may require repair.

19 Field Notes, Community Reporter in Nangade, 24 October 2023