CABO LIGADO

CONFLICT OBSERVATORY

30 March 2021

Cabo Ligado Weekly: 22-28 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: 838
- Total number of reported fatalities from organized violence: 2,689
- Total number of reported fatalities from civilian targeting: 1,341

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

SITUATION SUMMARY

The rainy season lull in fighting in Cabo Delgado is definitively over. Last week, on 24 March, insurgents launched a long-threatened major offensive on Palma town. The details and implications of that attack will be addressed in this week's Incident Focus below.

Insurgents also launched a simultaneous attack on coastal Macomia district on 24 March. The attackers arrived by boat, moving along the coast and surprising fishermen working the coasts of the Mucojo and Quiterajo administrative posts. Witnesses said that some were killed and others captured. No estimates about the number of casualties are yet available. Fishermen and traders had been returning to the coast in recent weeks, after a long period passed with no insurgent attacks in the area. People in Macomia town felt unable to reach the coast after the attack, as rumors swirled that insurgents were camped near Manica, an inland village in Mucojo administrative post.

Once insurgents attacked Palma, Mozambican security forces moved to increase security in Mueda to prevent an attack there. As part of the added security measures, entry and exit to the town has been sealed off. No immediate threats to Mueda have been reported, but with the town now the farthest north government stronghold, it is on high alert for potential insurgent activity.

INCIDENT FOCUS: PALMA

This week's Incident Focus will cover events in Palma town through 28 March. Coverage will continue next week with a full summary of the battle for Palma, as more information becomes available.

Palma residents first reported hearing gunfire in the south and west of town on the afternoon of 24 March. Private security sources also reported insurgents advancing from the north. Those reports appear to be confirmed by photographs apparently taken from Dyck Advisory Group (DAG) helicopters of food trucks overturned and drivers killed on the road

south from Quionga to Palma town. The Mozambican Defense Ministry later confirmed that attackers came from all three directions. Estimates from survivors suggested that around 100 insurgent fighters were involved in the attack overall, although competing estimates put the number two to three times as high. Cellular communication was quickly cut off, either by insurgents destroying cellular infrastructure or by government security forces attempting to limit insurgent communications — reports differ. Many civilians fled the area as insurgents entered the town and targeted banks, government buildings, and civil servants.

Insurgents continued to loot the town overnight, destroying a Total gas station and branches of BCI, Standard, and BIM banks. Fighting between insurgents and government troops, which had been intermittent on the previous day, grew fiercer on 25 March. Helicopters contracted to the Mozambican government exchanged fire with insurgents in the town, and bodies — some beheaded — could be seen in the streets. DAG helicopters also evacuated some civilians from the town on 25 March.

On 25 March, insurgent attention began to focus on the Amarula Palma Hotel, a lodging establishment to the north of Palma town serving mostly expatriates that also boasts a helipad and hangar. A number of local civil servants had taken shelter in the hotel, including the Palma district administrator. Once insurgents became aware of this, they besieged the Amarula, but were periodically beaten back by DAG helicopters. An attempt was made to evacuate the hotel by helicopter on the morning of 26 March, but it was only partially successful. The district administrator was evacuated, but most of the nearly 200 hotel guests were left behind. By the afternoon of 26 March, guests were plotting their own breakout. At least 16 vehicles carrying guests left the hotel in a convoy, planning to make a break for the beach. Insurgents ambushed the convoy shortly after it left the hotel, and only seven vehicles carrying around 100 passengers made it to the beach. They waited there overnight before being rescued on the morning of 27 March. The total number killed and captured in the ambush is unclear. The Mozambican military said that seven had died, but other estimates put the number near 50.

Other evacuation operations on 27 March moved many civilians to safety. DAG helicopters picked up about 20 people at the Amarula who had not left in the previous day's ill-fated convoy. Their efforts were aided by DAG setting up a helicopter refueling station on an island off the Palma coast, cutting down on travel time needed to refuel. Ships, including a ferry usually in operation in Dar Es Salaam, docked in Palma to take on refugees. Smaller boats that tried to pick people up off the beach were sometimes shot at by insurgents. Those ships and boats mostly sailed south to Pemba, disembarking well over 1,300 survivors — initially mainly Total staff and contractors — on 28 March. One source reported that suspected insurgents were among the passengers arriving in Pemba, and that weapons were recovered when government security personnel searched passengers.

Between 200 and 500 civilians, mostly locals, fled to the Tanzanian border seeking safety. They made the three-day journey on foot and without provisions. An indeterminate number of people — including children — died along the way. Tanzania is not allowing them to cross the border, but some are taking boats inland on the Rovuma River in hopes of reaching Nangade and, eventually, Mueda.

Overall damage and casualty figures for the Palma attack are unclear at this point. Pinnacle news estimates that by 26 March, insurgents had burned two thirds of the buildings in Palma town and killed at least 21 members of the government security forces. A Defense Ministry statement on 28 March estimated that insurgents had killed "tens of defenseless people." Some 600 civil servants remained in Palma as of 27 March, where they are prime insurgent targets. The government has not yet confirmed any deaths among civil servants, but survivors report that insurgents have been explicitly seeking them out.

In all, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimates that there were 110,000 civilians in Palma district prior to the attack, including 43,600 displaced people who largely sought shelter in and around Palma town. The numbers, which reflect a significant increase from OCHA's last public estimate of the displaced population in Palma, suggest that the long-term human toll of the attack could be staggering. With so few ways out of the district, those left behind after the 27 March evacuations are largely at the mercy of insurgents until government forces can retake at least Palma town. Fighting continued through 28 March and into the following week *(damage from the later rounds of fighting will be addressed in the next Cabo Ligado Weekly update).*

Various rumors of international military intervention in Palma swirled in the early stages of the attack. Yet the only publicly-acknowledged intervention proposal came from South African president Cyril Ramaphosa, who met with his cab-

inet on 27 March to consider sending a special operations team to assist in the battle for Palma. No such deployment has yet been reported. Portugal also offered to send troops to help extract civilians from Palma, but the Mozambican government declined the offer.

The Islamic State (IS) claimed credit for the attack on 29 March, saying it controlled the area of northern Palma where the banks and government buildings are located and that it had killed 55 people in the attack *(the details of the group's claim will be addressed in the next Cabo Ligado Weekly update).*

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

Even outside of Palma, Cabo Delgado's humanitarian crisis continues to expand. Mozambique's state newspaper Notícias reported last week that three cases of measles were recorded in Cabo Delgado in 2020. The disease was declared eradicated in Mozambique in 2016, but the Cabo Delgado conflict has disrupted vaccinations, leaving children vulnerable to the disease. Data disclosed to Notícias by Mozambique's health ministry show that health clinic visits by children in Cabo Delgado were down 23% in 2020.

Children are also missing out on education as a result of the conflict. Schools across Mozambique reopened last week at the start of the 2021 academic year, but 136 schools across the conflict zone will not be reopening. Most of the closures are in Quissanga district, where only five of the 37 schools in the district are reopening; Mocimboa da Praia district, where none of the 27 schools in the district are reopening; and Muidumbe district, where only three of the 14 schools in the district are reopening. Many of the children who would be attending those schools are displaced and are being integrated into the school systems where they are now living, but educational resources are stretched in the school systems at the edge of the conflict zone.

Meanwhile, the government's approach to providing air support for its security operations is set for a shift. The Mozambican national police force's contract with South African private military corporation (PMC) Dyck Advisory Group is due to expire on 6 April. It is not expected to be renewed. The attack on Palma may prompt a reconsideration but, if it does not, the main rotary wing units supporting government forces will be those recently acquired from South African arms dealer Paramount. Paramount, along with its partner Burnham Global, have trained Mozambican pilots to operate four Gazelle helicopters, while an Mi17 and an Mi24 provided by Paramount are currently in service in Cabo Delgado, flown by contracted Ukranian pilots. It is unclear who employs the Ukrainians, as Paramount vigorously denies suggestions that it is operating as a PMC in Mozambique. It is clear, however, that the pilots have not covered themselves in glory in the conflict so far, as multiple sources have reported seeing them drunk and disorderly near their base areas.

Going forward, the security benefits provided by whatever arrangement of helicopters and pilots the government settles on will be crucial to any potential resumption of operations at Total's liquified natural gas project in Palma district. Work on the project was set to begin again last week after a long delay caused by insurgent action near the site in January. The attack on Palma has led Total to reverse that decision, offering no timetable for when construction will resume. In a statement, the French energy major wrote that it "trusts the Government of Mozambique whose public security forces are currently working to take back the control of the area." If the "area" refers to the 25 kilometer security cordon around the project that the government agreed to maintain in its most recent security agreement with Total, it could be some time before the government regains control of it in a definitive enough way for the company to resume operations.

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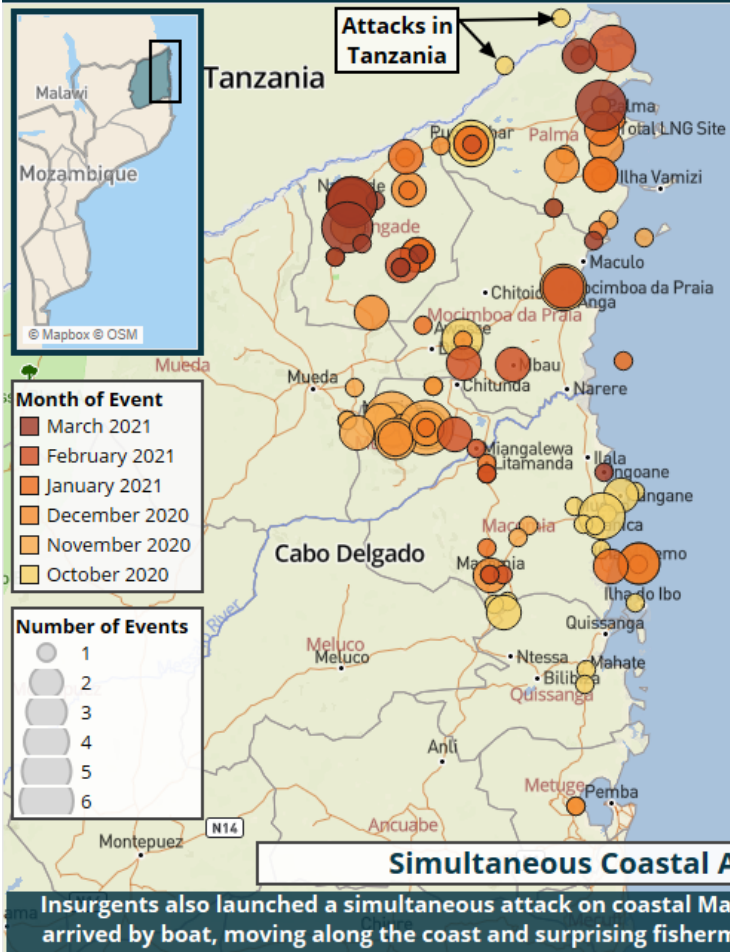

Battle for Palma

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Simultaneous Coastal Attack

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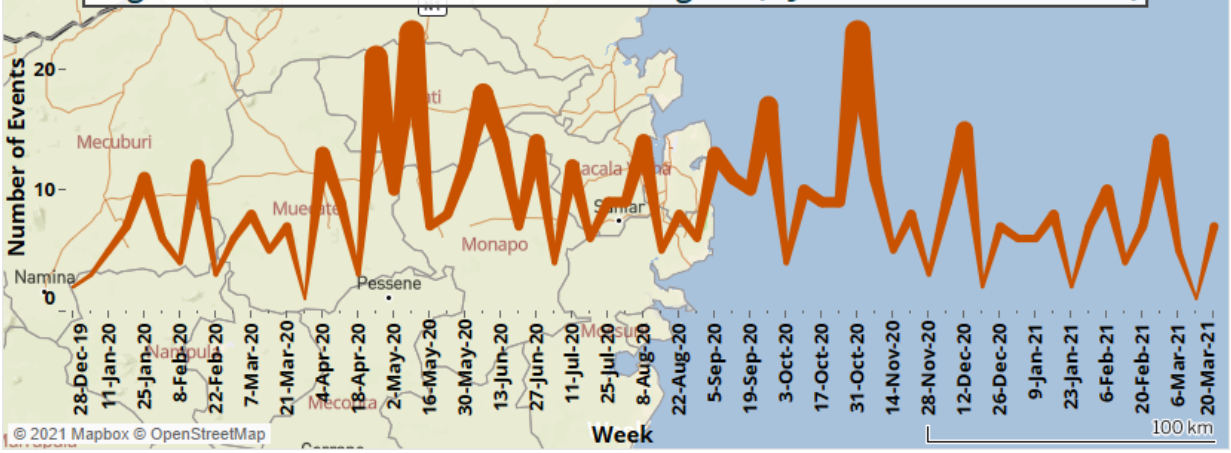
Organized Political Violence in Cabo Delgado (1 JAN 2020 - 26 MAR 2021)



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