



CABO LIGADO

6 April 2021

Cabo Ligado Weekly: 29 March-4 April

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

BY THE NUMBERS

Cabo Delgado, October 2017-April 2021

- Total number of organized violence events: 847
- Total number of reported fatalities from organized violence: 2,743
- Total number of reported fatalities from civilian targeting: 1,361

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

SITUATION SUMMARY

Fighting continued in and around Palma town last week, culminating in insurgents withdrawing from the town after a campaign of extensive looting and destruction. Details of events in Palma will be addressed in the Incident Focus below.

Outside Palma, insurgents also continued their renewed operations in coastal Macomia district. Starting the night of 2 April, insurgents attacked and then occupied the coastal village of Pangane. The attackers, who reportedly arrived by motorboat, looted the village and captured at least one civilian, likely one of the fishermen who had returned to the area. Insurgents remained encamped in the village through at least 5 April. Contradictory rumors in the Macomia district capital suggest that insurgents told civilians in Pangane that their goal was either to remain in Pangane through the end of Ramadan (12 May) or to occupy Macomia town by the end of Ramadan.

There was also an incident in Pemba last week that — while not clearly the work of combatants in the conflict — reflects the current climate in Cabo Delgado. On 1 April, there was a report of a shooting in the Expansão neighborhood of Pemba, where thousands of displaced civilians — including many newly arrived from Palma — are living in close quarters. There are no reports of casualties, nor any indication of who was involved, but the incident provoked panic in the area among people who had just fled deadly violence further north. People at all levels, from displaced persons to the provincial secretary of state for Cabo Delgado, [fear](#) potential insurgent violence in Pemba.

Those concerns are shared elsewhere in the province as well. On 2 April, in Sunate, Ancaube district, authorities arrested a person alleged by informers to be associated with the insurgency, according to a Pinnacle News [report](#). The same report suggests that the alleged insurgent named three associates in Metuge district who were subsequently also arrested. No evidence against the alleged insurgents has been made public. The first one arrested was reportedly found with a stockpile of food, suggesting they may have been denounced by neighbors for hoarding regardless of their level of association with the insurgency.

INCIDENT FOCUS: PALMA

Coverage of Palma in this week's Incident Focus picks up on 29 March. For coverage of the initial insurgent attack on Palma town through the events of 28 March, see the Incident Focus in last week's [Cabo Ligado update](#).

On 29 March, five days after the initial insurgent assault on Palma town, the Islamic State (IS) [claimed](#) the attack. In their claim, the group said that insurgents had taken control of Palma's banks, factories, and government buildings and that they had killed over 55 people. The claim was accompanied by new photos and video of Cabo Delgado insurgents wearing red scarves around their heads, which purported to show the attack on Palma. Instead, geolocation by independent experts shows that the images were taken in Mocimboa da Praia, [likely](#) in the run up to the Palma raid. IS has provided no further images of the actual attack or its aftermath.

The IS claim is the first for an attack by Cabo Delgado insurgents since its 1 November 2020 claim of attacks in southern Tanzania. As a measure of the closeness of the relationship between IS and the Cabo Delgado insurgents, the claim is something of a cypher. On one hand, its existence seems to rubbish theories about a break between IS and the insurgency that had cropped up during the long period between claims. Furthermore, the inclusion of images taken apparently during preparations for the attack suggests that the claim was planned before the attack took place, indicating coordination between the insurgents and the propaganda arm of IS. On the other hand, the delay between the attack and the claim — and the lack of images of the attack itself, both in the claim and subsequently — suggest at the very least that communication between Cabo Delgado insurgents and contacts in IS central is difficult. This may be due to interruptions in cellular service in Palma district, which was still down as of 4 April, but close coordination between insurgents and IS should be able to overcome that challenge. Ultimately, while the attack is a major victory for the insurgency, at this point the accompanying IS claim suggests that any attempts by the central apparatus of IS to become deeply embedded within its putative Mozambican affiliate have not yet been successful.

On the ground, on 29 March, government forces supported by Dyck Advisory Group (DAG) helicopters clashed with insurgents in Palma town in an attempt to retake the area. No casualty estimates for the day are available.

By 30 March, the government was claiming that it had regained control of Palma. To bolster its claim, the government flew a group of journalists into the town and embedded them with a Mozambican military unit to take a tour. In the middle of the tour, just as reporters for Mozambique's national television station were [confirming](#) with soldiers that morale was high after their victory, insurgents launched another attack near the tour area. No one was reported injured in the attack, but it underlined the precariousness of the government's position in the town at that point.

Fighting in the town between insurgents and government forces, supported by fire from DAG helicopters, continued on 31 March. According to a source involved in the government's effort to retake the town, the tide began to turn on 31 March and insurgent fire against helicopters supporting government troops died down. No casualty estimates for the day are available.

By 1 April, government forces were conducting house clearing operations to ensure that they had actually secured the areas of town that they were moving into. The same day, insurgents took control of two small boats that had been left on the beach in Palma, one a small landing craft and the other a nine-meter motor boat. Insurgents retained control of them until 2 April, when helicopters supporting government forces destroyed both craft.

Reports are still unclear about the extent of insurgent attack on the Afungi peninsula on 2 April. Starting on the evening of 2 April, reports began to emerge that insurgents were attacking outside the Total liquified natural gas project on Afungi where nearly 20,000 displaced people had gathered. Some reports claimed that insurgents were fighting government forces charged with protecting the site, while others said the attacks targeted displaced civilians staying in Quitunda, the resettlement village just outside Total's fenced-in facility. The extent of the attacks and the resulting casualties are still unknown.

Whatever the details of the attacks, they came as Total was [completing](#) its full withdrawal of staff from Afungi. The company had left a skeleton staff on the project site since work was suspended in January following another incident at Quitunda. By 2 April, that staff was gone, evacuated by sea and air. The evacuation leaves the project site in the hands of

the Mozambican security forces charged with defending it and further delays any prospect of a return to work on the site. The World Food Programme (WFP) also suspended evacuation flights from Palma on 2 April, [citing](#) security concerns.

Intermittent clashes between government forces and insurgents continued on 3 April, with insurgents making quick incursions into government-held areas before quickly retreating. No casualty estimates for the day are available. Government forces [secured](#) the Palma airstrip during their operations on 3 April, allowing for quicker reinforcement of the government's positions in the town.

On 4 April, military spokesman Chongo Vidigal [declared](#) Palma town “totally safe,” saying that security forces had cleared all areas of the town. Vidigal also [claimed](#) that government forces had killed a “significant” number of insurgents in its effort to retake the town, but declined to say how many. Journalists allowed into the town on 4 and 5 April confirmed that the town was back in government hands, but were unable to confirm casualty numbers.

DAG aircraft left Cabo Delgado on 4 April, as the private military contractor's contract with the Mozambican police is [up](#) and has not been renewed. The resulting hole in the government's rotary wing capability is meant to be filled by the South African defense firm Paramount Group, which has a year-long contract with the Mozambican military to sell helicopters and provide pilot training, among other goods and services. The shift between DAG, which had a strong working relationship with its employers in the police force, and Paramount, which is still working out how it will engage with the Mozambican military, does create a period in which government capabilities will be lessened. The Mozambican pilots of the four Gazelle helicopters that Paramount sold the Mozambican military, for example, will be far less experienced than the DAG pilots they replace once they come into action in Cabo Delgado. Given the importance of a robust rotary wing capability to government operations, any reduction in that capability could have significant security implications.

New information about the early stages of the attack also emerged last week. One survivor of the Palma attack, a security guard [interviewed](#) by the state newspaper Notícias, recounted that insurgents had begun their attack by infiltrating the town wearing the uniforms of the Rapid Intervention Unit, the special operations wing of the Mozambican police. As seen in the images posted in the IS claim, though, they differentiated themselves by wearing scarves around their heads. He also reported that insurgent fighters included armed children between the ages of nine and twelve. If confirmed, his report would be the first confirmed instance of Cabo Delgado insurgents utilizing child soldiers in an attack.

Among the sites looted by the insurgents early in the attack was a WFP distribution warehouse. The warehouse was not full, as WFP was at a low ebb in its resupply cycle, but informed estimates place the amount of food available for insurgents to take at roughly 23 tons.

There were [reports](#) last week that, in the first stages of the insurgent attack on 24 March, insurgents seized two small boats and then used them to hijack the cargo ship Alfajimbo off the coast of Palma. No further information has come to light about the reported hijacking.

Mozambican newspaper @Verdade [reported](#) last week that a Mozambican military helicopter — presumably one of the gunships piloted by contracted Ukrainians — killed six people when it mistakenly fired on a truck evacuating soldiers and civilians from Palma town on 24 March. The survivors of the attack had to hide in the bush until they were rescued on 27 March.

Among those who fought for the government starting on 27 March was a 40-man unit of police trained by DAG under the company's now-expired contract with the Mozambican police force. The unit, a subset of the 120 police who underwent DAG training, acquitted itself well as a frontline force entering Palma from the west. Trained to operate in coordination with DAG helicopters, it is unclear how effective this unit will be in the post-DAG era.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

The attack at Palma has radically worsened Cabo Delgado's displacement crisis. Between 27 March and 5 April, the UN's Institute of Migration [counted](#) 11,650 internally displaced persons arriving from Palma in Mueda, Nangade, Montepuez, and Pemba districts. More are still incoming by foot and bus, and the count does not include those who have fled to Ilha Matemo and other islands off the Cabo Delgado coast. Children account for 44% of those displaced, including 122 who

arrived unaccompanied by an adult family member. Palma refugees in Pemba are being sent to live in the Expansão neighborhood, where conditions are increasingly cramped. At least one cholera case has been reported among Palma refugees in Pemba.

Other displaced civilians fled north, where they have received a chilly welcome in Tanzania. On 30 March, Tanzanian officials began deporting displaced Mozambicans, sending them to the Negomano border post in Mueda district. Many are then continuing to Mueda town. By 5 April, around 600 Mozambicans had been deported and the UN was [raising](#) concerns about Tanzania's treatment of the asylum-seekers.

In addition to the thousands of displaced who have left Palma, many thousands more remain in the district but cannot return to their homes. Total [estimates](#) that there are some 23,000 displaced people staying in the Quitunda resettlement village adjacent to the Total project area, but other sources estimate that the number is more likely between 25,000 and 30,000. While Palma town has been cleared of insurgents for now, the government's security umbrella does not extend to Quitunda at this point, making it very difficult for humanitarian organizations to reach the large number of displaced people remaining there.

On 30 March, Cabo Delgado provincial secretary of state Armindo Ngunga [held](#) an emergency meeting with humanitarian organizations in an attempt to increase the level of coordination between the humanitarian community and the government in anticipation of the large number of displaced people arriving from Palma. The invited NGOs assured Ngunga that they could serve the people displaced from Palma who reached Pemba, but some organizations are seeing their resources thinning. UN agencies are [struggling](#) to meet the increased humanitarian demand given the resource constraints they are facing. The \$254 million humanitarian appeal for 2021 that the UN made in December 2020, before the added stress of the Palma attack, has only been 10% funded, with 25% of the year already gone. The UN resident coordinator in Mozambique, Myrta Kaulard, characterized the funding shortfall as "very serious" and unnamed UN sources expressed concern that "what is in the warehouse is not enough" to care for the hundreds of thousands displaced in Cabo Delgado.

Mozambican government responses to the humanitarian crisis are even more stretched. In Nangade, most civil servants outside of the education sector have fled the district, fearing further attacks. The district has received, by the UN's [count](#), over 2,200 new displaced civilians from Palma, but it has few resources to care for them. The district health center, for example, is down to three employees remaining in the district. District leadership is also absent — the district administrator, permanent secretary, and directors of planning, civil registry, and agriculture have all been out of the district for at least three weeks.

Nationally, however, the Mozambican government has tried to play down the extent of the crisis in public. President Filipe Nyusi made no public comment on the Palma attack [until](#) 31 March, when he brushed it off as being "not the biggest" attack the country has suffered during the insurgency. He urged Mozambicans not to be "disturbed" by the attack and praised the work of government security forces.

Also on the national level, the president of the Mozambican Association of Judges, Carlos Mondlane, [urged](#) the government last week to create special military tribunals to handle prosecutions of insurgents charged with terrorism. Mondlane argued that civil courts are unprepared to deal with the "type of evil" represented by insurgents. Civil society critics pointed out that military tribunals are only constitutional in Mozambique when the country is in a declared war, which it is not. They also pointed to past instances of military tribunals in Mozambican history, when dozens of Mozambicans were sentenced to death after truncated trials. In 2019, Justice Minister Joaquim Verissimo [assured](#) the Mozambican parliament that the Nyusi administration had no interest in resurrecting military tribunals, but Mondlane's statement suggests that hawkish elements in the government may be open to reassessing its position.

On the international front, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) has [scheduled](#) an Extraordinary Double Troika Summit in Maputo for 8 April, with technical meetings the day before to address the Cabo Delgado insurgency. Representatives from Mozambique, Malawi, Tanzania, Botswana, South Africa, and Zimbabwe will take part. Given Mozambique's ongoing reluctance to engage with SADC on the specifics of regional support for its counterinsurgency effort, it is unclear if the meeting will produce progress towards a support package or merely be a venue for regional governments to vent their frustration with the Mozambican approach to international cooperation thus far.

