Cabo Ligado Weekly: 24-30 August

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Cabo Ligado — or ‘connected cape’ — is a new conflict observatory monitoring political violence in Mozambique, launched in partnership with Zitamar News, Mediafax, and the International Crisis Group.

Situation Summary

Government troops were on the move in Cabo Delgado last week, as at least one counteroffensive kicked into gear and insurgents clashed with government convoys. Early in the week, insurgents demonstrated their continued presence in the environs of Mocimboa da Praia by attacking vehicles on the N380. On 24 August, insurgents shot at a cement truck passing through Awasse, Mocimboa da Praia district, which sits about 40 kilometers west of Mocimboa da Praia town on the N380. Then, on 27 August, insurgents engaged a military convoy traveling through Awasse.

On 28 August, insurgents drove more civilians out of Mocimboa da Praia and attacked civilians that night at Awasse, although no details of that attack have come through.

Also on 28 August, in Pemba, security forces intercepted 60 people traveling from Nampula on two boats who claimed that they were headed to Mocimboa da Praia to fish. Given that Mocimboa da Praia is under insurgent control, authorities arrested the travelers on suspicion of being insurgent recruits. Local civilian sources confirmed that, in normal times, it is not uncommon for people to travel from Nampula to Mocimboa da Praia for fishing. However, they also remarked that these were not normal times and expressed significant skepticism about the travelers’ story. Nampula has long been discussed as a major recruitment area for the insurgency outside Cabo Delgado. If those arrested prove to be insurgent recruits, they would be the largest group of recruits from Nampula the government has yet interdicted.

By 30 August, reports, limited in detail, emerged of a government counteroffensive beginning against insurgents still occupying Mocimboa da Praia, as well as government operations in Quissanga district. The same day, government troops heading overland from Pemba to Mueda ran into a contingent of insurgents at Miangalewa, Muidumbe district, Pinnacle News reported. The clash seems to have been accidental rather than the result of a pre-planned ambush, and the government troops were able to disengage with undisclosed casualties.

Last week also seemed to be the end of the public debate about whether insurgents had successfully occupied Mocimboa da Praia -- a fact that various pro-government commentators had called into question since Mozambican forces withdrew from the town on 11 August. Mozambican military sources admitted to reporters that insurgents remain in the town, while the Islamic State (IS) published photos on 27 August of fighters in the port and other areas of the town. The pictures,
which ran in the IS publication Al Naba, were accompanied by a long article which claimed that insurgents had killed 130 government troops in the assault on Mocimboa da Praia and that they had burned Christian property in the town. The article’s timeline of events in Mocimboa da Praia was off by about 10 days, and the writers seemed to rely on press and think tank reports as much as direct sources in describing the attack and occupation. This underscores the difficulties IS has faced in coordinating with the Cabo Delgado insurgency.

Finally, more details came to light last week about the 12 August arrest of a man who was set to take delivery of bags of weapons in Pemba. Ntego Crisanto Ntego, the provincial director of the Mozambican national criminal investigative service SERNIC, told reporters that the bags were sent from Mueda to Pemba on a bus and contained five AK-47s and ten clips of ammunition, along with six Mozambican military uniforms. The man denied being a member of the insurgency and said he was picking up the bags for his cousin. Ntego said that shipping the guns and uniforms matches an insurgent modus operandi his office has observed before in which insurgents forward deploy equipment for an attack before the fighters who will carry out the attack arrive.

**Incident Focus: Gathering Counterattacks**

As had been anticipated by Cabo Delgado watchers, last week, reports emerged that government operations to retake Mocimboa da Praia were underway. In addition, other government offensives elsewhere in the province seem to be either taking place or are being planned. Details about these operations are still scarce, but reports on troop movements provide an idea of who is involved.

On 29 August, a large military convoy of between 20 and 30 vehicles left Pemba and traveled north, toward Mueda. Witnesses said the vehicles were mostly buses and trucks packed with newly trained infantrymen, and one source recognized their uniforms as those of the police Rapid Intervention Unit, the UIR. This convoy, it seems, was the one that fought off an insurgent contingent at Miangalewa the next day on its way north to Mueda. Sources also reported seeing five helicopters flying from Pemba in the same direction the convoy was heading -- presumably air support from Dyck Advisory Group, which is now operating eight helicopters in Cabo Delgado. Mueda is a likely staging point for a government move on Mocimboa da Praia, as the port town is essentially a straight shot 100 kilometers east on good roads. That route, however, would take government troops through the hotly contested crossroads of Awasse and then onto sections of the N380 that have been under insurgent control since at least 11 August. The likelihood of insurgent ambushes on the route is quite high.

There were also reports of government operations farther south. Local militias, apparently acting at the behest of the government, told people living in the lowlands of Muidumbe district -- in particular, the residents of Chitunda, Xitaxi, and Miangalewa -- to move to the district highlands around Namacande to avoid being caught up in a government offensive in coming days. The message was sent out on 27 and 28 August, and by 29 August, enough people had arrived in Namacande that a contact there reported concerns that food might soon be scarce in the district capital. Local militias -- presumably the same ones reported armed by the government in an earlier
ACLED Weekly Report -- also set up checkpoints and demanded to see papers from taxis leaving Muidumbe for the relative safety of Mueda.

**Government Response**

As the Mozambican government prepared to unveil the Integrated Northern Development Agency (ADIN), its initiative to address non-military aspects of the Cabo Delgado conflict, the international community continued to explore ways to support the humanitarian side of the Mozambican counterinsurgency effort. The United Nations framed its request for member states to help fund the COVID-19 response in Mozambique as a refugee issue, highlighting the danger the pandemic poses to displaced people in Cabo Delgado and pairing its $67.5 million COVID-19 response ask with its $35.5 million request for IDP support in Cabo Delgado. The British government, for its part, told Mozambican president Filipe Nyusi in a phone call that it is interested in supporting ADIN directly. For governments put off by persistent reports of state security force abuses, support for ADIN may end up becoming the preferred method of aiding the Mozambican government in Cabo Delgado.

In the meantime, many IDPs in the province are still without aid. John Grabowiski, of the humanitarian assistance department at the US Agency for International Development, summarized the problem of delivering aid in an insecure environment well, saying “while we await the normalisation of the situation, all [humanitarian] actions have been directed towards the districts of southern Cabo Delgado and the provinces of Nampula and Zambézia, where more displaced people have been received.” His agency is donating shelter and materials for around 16,000 displaced people, but even that is less than 10% of the estimated number of displaced, and can only be delivered to those who have already made it to southern areas outside the conflict zone.

IDPs continue to move around, both within and outside the conflict zone. A report from Pangane, Macomia district says that boats of refugees from islands in Mocimboa da Praia district are still arriving, many without food, and that there are roughly 5,000 displaced people in Pangane now. The cholera outbreak there has been brought under control, and a paramedic from the public health team that visited the village has stayed behind to monitor the situation. In Pemba, last week 1,183 new refugees were registered, mostly from islands around Mocimboa da Praia. A source pointed out that the registered number is likely an undercount of the true number of new arrivals.

Internally, the government is attempting to improve morale -- or at least quiet dissent -- within the ranks of security forces. Mozambican police chief Bernardino Rafael visited members of the 6th Battalion of the UIR in Pemba and urged them not to complain on social media that they are not receiving the same hazard pay as members of the military, saying “you can’t put a price on defense.” How persuasive that argument is remains to be seen.

*Erratum: Last week's Weekly Report misspelled the name of Ilha Nhonge, Mocimboa da Praia district. We regret the error.*
Note: There is often a lack of consensus over the spellings of place names in Mozambique. We endeavor to be consistent within Cabo Ligado publications, but be aware that alternative spellings exist and may appear in other publications.

ACLED's real-time data updates are currently paused through August 2020. Data for 2 August to 5 September will be released on 7 September.