

MOZAMBIQUE JIHADISTS CAPTURE STRATEGIC PORT

By Donnelly McClelland



Islamist insurgents captured the strategic northern Mozambique port town of Mocimboa da Praia on Monday [23 March], their biggest prize in a 30-month-long insurgency, according to security sources and the official news agency. The insurgents attacked by land and sea before dawn and overran the town and its military base, according to security sources and the official news agency AIM. (*Daily Maverick*)

Who are the militants?

No group has formerly accepted responsibility for the attack but likely candidates include Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama, or "followers of the prophetic tradition" – a shadowy armed group that has killed hundreds and displaced thousands since it launched its first attacks in October 2017, in the same town, Mocimboa da Praia. It has also been reported that the Islamic State Central African Province (ISCAP) could be responsible for this latest attack. The local population calls the group behind the attacks "al-Shabaab", which means "youth" in Arabic, but despite the name being the same as the terror group in Somalia, no formal links to them have been demonstrated.

Back in 2017 Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama's attacks were dismissed as isolated acts of banditry, but the frequency of their assaults has been increasing, and their use of more advanced weaponry and evolving tactical engagement indicates that the group has become more established and accomplished. Attacks more than tripled in 2019 from the previous year, according to Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project's annual report. Mozambique experienced the biggest increase in attacks by Islamic militants globally in 2019, predominantly in the oil-rich north of the country. One of the biggest challenges is that nobody really knows who the insurgents are – they don't make public statements, so their motives remain unclear. Speculation and conspiracy theories abound. According to *The Conversation*: "Lack of information and clashing explanations have led to confusion as to what's happening in Northern Mozambique and what should be done to reverse the situation." The government's response and their clampdown on journalists attempting to cover the story has added to the confusion.

Seeds of discontent and roots of the insurgency

The Islamic militant insurgency dates back to the early 2000s when some young men within the Islamic Council of Mozambique began to develop a new reading and practice of Islam. In Cabo Delgado, they created a sub-organisation within the Islamic Council called "Ansaru-Sunna" which registered legally with the state. It built new mosques and preached a stricter form of Islam across the province. Thereafter, a more radical and activist group formed within this sub-organisation and split off as a sect – what became known locally as "al-Shabaab". This group originally focussed on religious debates, practice and opposition to the secular state. But, as tensions between the group and local villagers flared, the group began to resort to force. Only after the government got involved and began to arrest a number of leaders did the group become more militant.

However, the seeds of discontent were not limited to religious disagreements, socio-economic factors played a pivotal role in the evolution of the group. Cabo Delgado is Mozambique's poorest province; unemployment is high, particularly among the youth. It's also largely rural, and government services are unreliable. The major tipping point, however, has been the recent major discoveries of substantial oil and gas reserves (estimated to be worth \$60 billion) in the region, which has generated many expectations, but communities have seen very few, if any, benefits, particularly in rural areas.

The insurgency has subsequently grown from a localised matter to a growing regional concern. This is fuelled by the increasing number of foreign nationals who appear to have joined the militants, mainly from Tanzania, but also Kenya, Somalia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). There also appears to be strong links between various smuggling rings involving human trafficking, drugs, gemstones, wildlife poaching and weapons. The government does not seem to be making much headway in combating the insurgency and have themselves been accused of heavy-handed tactics. There is concern that the government's mismanagement may push more young people to join these radical groups, further deepening the crisis.

FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Mozambique is very much a broken nation – shattered by colonialization and a protracted and brutal civil war – it remains one of the poorest nations in the world. Added to these socio-economic challenges are numerous natural disasters such as severe droughts, cyclones and flooding. The nation is heavily reliant on aid and has a high public debt, which, combined with existing poverty, makes it incredibly challenging to grow their economy. It is understandable therefore that the prospect of much wealth in the Cabo Delgado region has led to a variety of illegal and destructive behaviours. But, it's in these challenging circumstances where the true Gospel can shine the brightest. Due to Mozambique's constitution providing for freedom of religion, Christian groups, organisations and churches can invest in these desperately needy communities. It is crucial that the Church not miss this opportunity or be deterred by this violent insurgency.

Despite more than half of Mozambique's population professing some affiliation with Christianity, the region of Cabo Delgado is a Muslim-majority area. The *Joshua Project* indicates that there are only nine 'unreached' people groups in Mozambique, with a large proportion of them in this region. There is an established indigenous Christian presence in the area, but many have already been targeted by the recent insurgency. During this most recent attack, Christians were sending out desperate messages asking for prayer as many hid to avoid detection. One mentioned that the armed men were ordering civilians to the mosque to pray to expose the Christians in their midst. Another message was received on the morning of 25 March to confirm that a pastor and her family evaded the attack and together with three other Christian families found safety elsewhere – they, all 21 of them, are sheltering in one home.

Northern Mozambique is indeed a harvest field, albeit a deeply challenging one.

Please pray with us:

- For the rule of law to be re-established in Mocimboa da Praia and the larger Cabo Delgado region
- For the protection of all vulnerable civilians, including believers
- For believers to remain steadfast, even in the face of possible torture and death – that their lives will be testimonies to those around them, including their persecutors.

IMAGE:

<https://allafrica.com/download/pic/main/main/csiid/00371171:9cf6effd6662501cc894d47c61ad7398:arc614x376:w1200.jpg>