

Covering the insurgency in Mozambique

By Fernando Lima

The war in Cabo Delgado has just entered its seventh year. The security situation shows signs of improvement, but it is far from over. A mix of elements explain the different reasons for the conflict that cannot just to be centered on the exploration of gas at sea deep waters, not too far from the coastal line.

There is a religious element, a certain interpretation of Islam, but poverty, resentment, old ethnic/community battles are also at the root of the conflict. The idea of *jihad* being fought in Mozambique brought by combatants from Tanzania, DRC and far away places such as Somalia. In 2019, ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) declared that Mozambique was part of their war in the Central Africa Wilayah, a self-proclaimed caliphate. The group that is XXX in Cabo Delgado is called Answar al-Sunna and in their propaganda videos they wave the flag for the caliphate. Some logistics for the group comes from the *hawala* system, a traditional form of circulating support based on trust and solidarity. It can function within the Mozambican boundaries but from abroad too.

Six years of violence have internally displaced one million people from the northern districts of Cabo Delgado to the southern part of the province and neighboring territories such as Nampula and Zambezia. It can be said around 4000 people have been killed, some of them having their heads being spared in front of their close relatives.

An ill prepared national army faced enormous difficulties to handle the security situation, which has thus resulted in numerous abuses committed against the civilian population. Private military companies were called to handle the situation which led to the appearance of the Wagner group, from Russia in September 2019 and, later on, the Dick Advisory Group (DAG) from South Africa, which ended its contract in March 2021. Private military companies were then replaced by a multinational force from SADC (Southern Africa Development Community) and a force of police and army personnel from Rwanda in June/July 2021.

Taken by apparent surprise, the government have tried to present the violent actions in October 2017 as acts of banditry and violations of law and order. This partially explains the use of police special units to handle the violence. But police special units such as UIR and GOE also have battle experience after having been used in central Mozambique against a low-profile insurgency waged by Renamo in the Gorongosa region since 2013. At the time, they were better prepared and equipped than the armed forces.

The gas projects in Afungi peninsula, in Palma district were at full force in 2017 and admitting the existence of organized armed groups was a major embarrassment for the government and could have potentially halted investments that could have changed the country's development dramatically.

Similar to what happened in the armed incidents in central Mozambique, the “denial strategy” was also implemented in northern Cabo Delgado. Very few violent incidents were reported since October 2017. In fact, attempts to report on savage attacks on villages or FDS (Mozambican Defense and Security Forces) were seen with hostility by the regime propagandists. To the extreme, reporting on violence was portrayed as a show of sympathy to the *jihadist* cause. In January 2019, two journalists from a community radio in Macomia, Amade Abubacar and Germano Adriano were detained, being accused of producing stories on the ongoing violence. Later, after a search of their personal computers and cell phones, they were accused by the security forces of “contacts with the enemy”.

In April, 2019, the journalists were freed, but, Cabo Delgado was in a non-declared blackout situation, a no-go area for journalists. A year later, in April 2020, Ibraimo Mbaruco, a journalist with a community radio in Palma was detained by a military group and disappeared. National and international groups continue to struggle for answers about his real situation. Most of his friends and acquaintances believe he is presumably dead.

Most of the reports on the activities of the Wagner group or DAG were reported outside Mozambique and then reproduced in the local media. Officially, the presence of such groups in Cabo Delgado was never recognized, despite the crucial role DAG helicopters and crews have played in countering the *jihadist* offensive in early 2020 culminating with attacks against district headquarters in Mocímboa da Praia, Quissanga, Macomia and Muidumbe.

Despite the US government and the EU acknowledging the presence of ISIS in Cabo Delgado and had some of its leaders declared as terrorists, the Mozambican government avoided such affiliations preferring to present the violence in the province as portrayed by a faceless group. On the opposite side, independent media and research organizations were trying to report on the events and to get to the root causes of the conflict. Both initiatives were met with hostility by the Government and its propaganda machinery.

Under such circumstances, reporting on the war zones became an impossible mission. There is no evidence of independent reporting “on the other side of the war” besides ISIS own propaganda and foreign sympathizers “with the cause”.

The attack against the town of Palma and its occupation in March 2021 got prominent coverage by Mozambican media. The international repercussions of this major attack would make it impossible to ignore. But the government was confronted with its own contradictions a few months later when, in August, a joint Mozambican/Rwandan force took over Mocímboa da Praia. Officially, the most important town in northern Cabo Delgado was never occupied by Answar al-Sunna.

Along with the stability brought on by the presence of the contingents of SADC and Rwandan forces, the government and the military felt more and more comfortable to invite journalists to visit war zones in Cabo Delgado. Rwandan military have their own well-oiled communications

apparatus. Despite expressed disagreement from the Mozambican government, the Rwandan army, since its formal arrival in Mozambique, in July 2021, have promoted guided tours for its own media and major international outlets.

I have tried to summarize how difficult it has been to report independently on the real situation in Cabo Delgado. There were no written orders or imposed censorship but there was a de facto blackout. If you choose to risk yourself in a confrontational area, you can be momentarily detained or end up disappearing. Even at a distance, to report on the war demands a very accurate exercise on confirming incidents, details, casualties, roads, crossings, names of villages. Every minor mistake can be used against you or simply be used as “cooperation with the enemy”.

Media organizations imposed on themselves codes to validate stories to avoid inaccuracies or the involuntary spread of rumors. The intelligence gathering community, widespread in the conflict areas, are also important sources, despite some sort of validating protocols should be exercised in order to avoid collateral damaging effects.

State security services have been under strong criticism for inadequate data produced regarding jihadist activity, but they have been very accurate and aggressive in the harassment of journalists and its activities. Most of the reporting on war zones rely on local sources or what can be described as “citizen reporting”. Telephone operations function in a satisfactory manner as well as energy supply reestablished by late 2021. At least in all district capitals.

In order to avoid trouble, most of the trained journalists travel to Cabo Delgado as “ordinary citizens” using public transportation and avoiding the airport of Pemba, where your presence can be easily scrutinized by the security forces. Some rely on humanitarian organizations, missionary services or as guests of the oil companies operating in Palma and Mocímboa da Praia.

Most of the articles published in the Mozambican media, especially those based on fact finding missions, are not signed. One penalty could be your own exclusion on further trips to the war zones.

These days, the insurgency groups, mainly along the coast, for reasons explained by family ties and origins, are trying to change their methods of contact with civilian villagers. They entertain lengthy conversations preaching religious teachings, buying food, a real “hearts and minds” campaign. The government continues tear the line of terrorism and terrorists. The same qualifier used by the colonial powers to refer to Frelimo, then a liberation movement fighting for independence. When Renamo started their military operations claiming to fight for multiparty democracy, they were also labelled terrorists.

Some press follows the line, some don't. Probably most choices are taken out of ideological proselytism. Just avoiding trouble.

But even under difficult circumstances, choices always need to be made.