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Cabo Ligado Monthly: February 2024

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

VITAL STATS

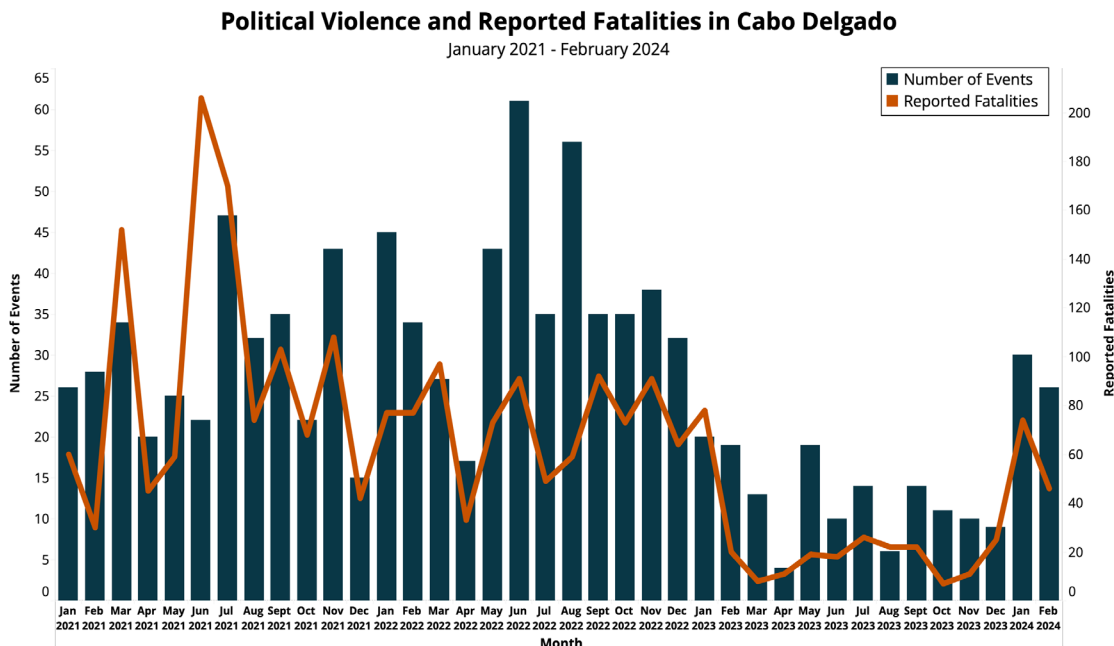
- ACLED records 24 political violence events in Cabo Delgado in February, resulting in at least 44 reported fatalities
- Seventeen of the political events were incidents targeting civilians, 15 of which were committed by ISM
- Events were mostly concentrated in Chiúre district in the south, where ACLED records 11 political violence events

VITAL TRENDS

- ISM killed 20 members of FDS in one incident, the greatest number of state forces fatalities since March 2021
- In events targeting civilians, ISM killed at least 15 civilians, five times as many as those killed by FDS
- ISM remained active in Macomia district and Meluco districts, particularly along the N380 highway

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- Islamic State Mozambique’s war on the church
- What IS photo reports tell us about the conflict



FEBRUARY SITUATION SUMMARY

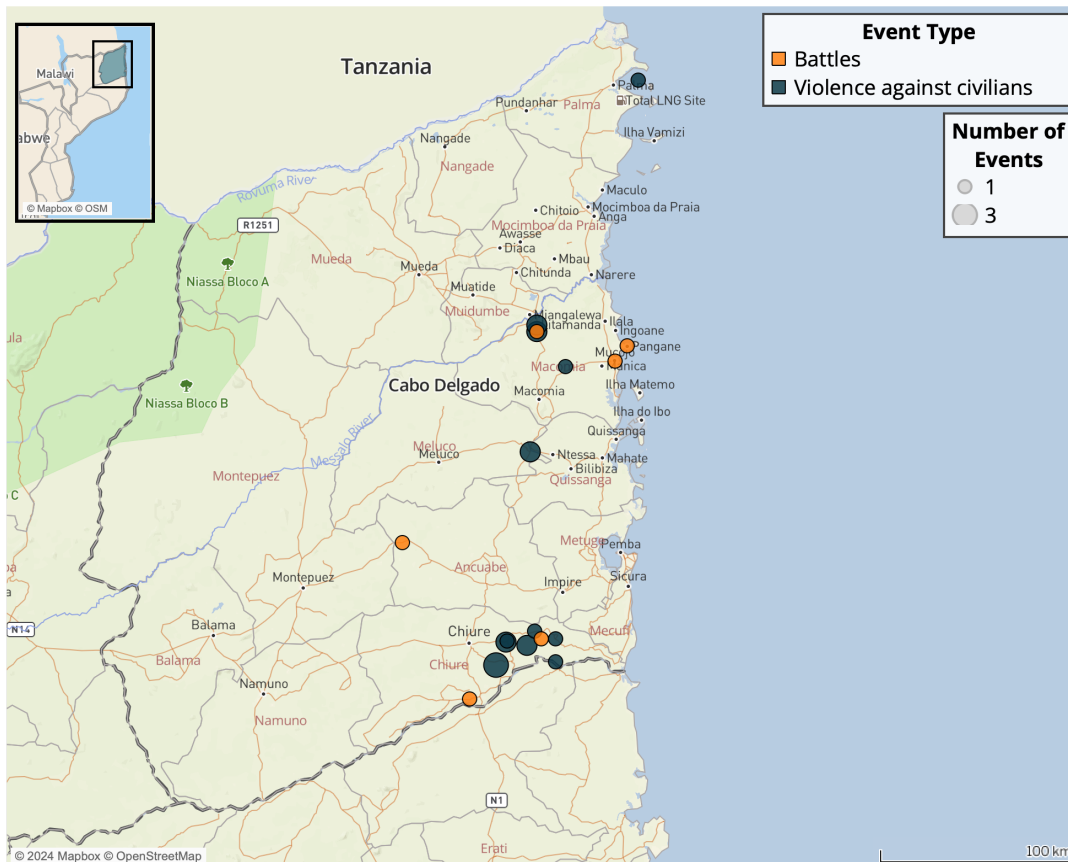
February was most notable for Islamic State Mozambique’s (ISM) push south to Chiúre district and a significant victory for the group in Macomia district. ISM was active in Chiúre between 9 and 28 February, with at least one group moving north to Ancuabe district in the back half of the month, presumably returning to camps in Macomia district. While the Rwandan Security Forces (RSF) were deployed to Chiúre from their Ancuabe base to the north, ACLED records just one clash between ISM and state forces in Chiúre district during the month, and one clash with the unarmed Naparama militia.

In Macomia district on 9 February, ISM overran a Defense Armed Forces of Mozambique (FADM) base at Mucojo village on the Macomia coast. This was the third time control of the village has changed hands since 20 January. ISM killed at least 20 in the attack. FADM has not returned to the village, thereby effectively ceding control of Mucojo and surrounding areas to ISM.

Islamic State (IS) media channels gave significant coverage to events in Mozambique, through incident claims, photo reports, and coverage in its al-Naba weekly newsletter, and related audio reports.

Political Violence in Cabo Delgado

February 2024



FRAGILE GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION

By Tomás Queface, Zitamar News

The lack of consistent communication on the conflict in northern Mozambique continues to be one of the greatest weaknesses of the Mozambican authorities in their response to the insurgency. A feature since the beginning of the conflict, it has been exacerbated by increasing insurgent attacks in recent weeks. The recent escalation of violence, the spread of insurgent groups across the center and south of Cabo Delgado, attacks on villages, the destruction of houses, churches, and government infrastructure, as well as the killing of civilians, has prompted an uncoordinated, distorted, and confused reaction from the authorities, which has led to tension with the media.

On 29 February, Mozambique's Defense Minister, Cristóvão Chume, [described](#) the movement of the insurgent groups, which came within 20 kilometers of the provincial capital Pemba, as an attempt to create panic among the population. According to Chume, these incursions by small groups do not imply an upsurge in violence, and the situation in the province remains "stable." At the time Chume made that statement, humanitarian organizations were [reporting](#) that more than 30,000 people had been displaced by the attacks in Chiúre and fled to the neighboring province of Nampula. Speaking about the attacks on Mazeze, the administrator of Chiúre, Oliveira Amimo, [said](#) that the insurgent attacks had resulted in the destruction of basic infrastructure, such as government buildings, churches, and houses. Given the information on the impact of the attacks, the Bishop of Pemba [said](#) that there was no doubt that Cabo Delgado province was "on fire" and that there was no point in minimizing the situation.

Mozambican President Filipe Nyusi also gave a less optimistic view of the conflict. First, he [said](#) that the new dynamic of the insurgents requires a new approach from Mozambique's Defense and Security Forces (FDS). However, when the French government [issued](#) a statement warning its citizens against traveling to certain parts of Cabo Delgado due to the increase in instability, Nyusi was [furious](#), given the implications that the statement could have for the resumption of work by the French multinational Total on its liquefied natural gas project in Afungi, Palma. Although he didn't provide any information to contradict the warning, Nyusi said he didn't understand why the French had issued such a statement. President Nyusi later said that the insurgent movements in the south were aimed at [recruiting](#) "children and young people," but that the FDS had thwarted these efforts.

While Minister Chume minimized the conflict situation and President Nyusi showed some concerns about the new developments, the governor of Cabo Delgado, Valige Tauabo, directed his attacks at the press. He [accused](#) journalists of being "in harmony" with the insurgents by reporting insurgent attacks in real time. This, he believes, weakens the FDS. He accused the press of being unpatriotic by highlighting the achievements of the insurgents rather than the Mozambican forces.

These inconsistencies in information regarding the conflict and attacks on the media reveal the government's weakness in managing communication. This weakness could be due to the lack of a central communications strategy, which would allow the government to speak with a single voice and present a unified version and response to the conflict, thus avoiding conflicting, contradictory, and incoherent interventions.

The government has a reactive rather than proactive approach; the authorities only talk about the conflict when under public pressure. A proactive approach would enable them to make information available so that they can make decisions and take steps in advance to address security concerns. Another problem is the lack of regular media briefings. The absence of regular official information leads, for example, to situations in which journalists are forced to rely on information provided by IS in the absence of timely information from official sources. To make matters worse, the government has relied on propaganda channels or

state-controlled media outlets to respond to critics and disseminate information that misrepresents reality rather than conveying facts on the ground.

ISLAMIC STATE MOZAMBIQUE'S WAR ON THE CHURCH

By Tom Gould, Zitamar News

In February, ISM mounted its largest sustained campaign of attacks on Christian property in Cabo Delgado province since the conflict began in 2017, claiming to have burned 18 churches in just three weeks. While ISM propaganda has always invoked the [language of holy war against 'infidels,'](#) these church burnings represent a novel effort to give effect to its rhetoric, consistent with other recent attempts to adopt the trappings of a real Islamic state.

The attacks were all concentrated in Chiúre district in southern Cabo Delgado, where insurgents launched an offensive in early February and spent much of the rest of the month marauding through villages, destroying buildings, and murdering civilians. In the IS newspaper al-Naba and on social media, insurgents claimed to have burned a total of 18 churches in nine villages in Chiúre. Many of these claims were accompanied by photos of fighters setting light to the churches and demolishing other Christian icons, such as crucifixes.

In a meeting of local church representatives, Dom António Juliasse, the Bishop of Pemba, said Christians in Cabo Delgado were living in a state of persecution, according to a Brazilian missionary who was present. Juliasse reportedly said that the church of Pemba was going through a "moment of tribulation" and that the diocese would refuse to pay any ransoms to free Christian hostages as this would only feed the insurgency — and that President Nyusi had been unhappy at a ransom having been paid by the previous bishop of Pemba, Dom Luís Lisboa, for the release of two Brazilian nuns abducted in Mocímboa da Praia in 2020.

Although the number of churches destroyed in this campaign is unusual, it is not the first time that insurgents have targeted Christian institutions. IS claimed responsibility for burning at least 10 churches in 2022, five of them during a surge of attacks in [Ancuabe](#) and [Macomia](#) districts in June. In September of that year, an insurgent offensive also saw a brief incursion into Nampula province, where fighters [attacked a Catholic mission](#) in Chipene, shooting dead an Italian nun and setting fire to the premises.

In [May 2020](#), insurgents ransacked a Benedictine monastery and burned a Catholic hospital in Awase, in Mocímboa da Praia district, prompting fears that insurgents were targeting Christian communities. Then Bishop Lisboa tried to allay these fears, pointing out that other buildings had also been destroyed. Cabo Ligado noted at the time that there was little evidence that the insurgents' emphasis on attacking Christians in its propaganda was driving its targeting decisions.

With these latest attacks in Chiúre, there can be no doubt that insurgents are seeking out Christian targets. This appears to form part of a more general attempt to [make good on its claim to embody a 'caliphate,'](#) or Islamic government. After taking over Mucojo in Macomia in January, insurgents banned alcohol and imposed dress codes and haircuts based on a strict interpretation of Sharia law.

In [February](#), insurgents also left behind a note in Quissanga district demanding non-Muslims pay a tax called 'jizya' and even formed checkpoints where they collected tens of thousands of meticaís from passing drivers. Insurgents have been leaving notes such as this around Cabo Delgado since at least [November 2022](#), but only this month have they started trying to enforce this tax.

Although the insurgency has been affiliated with IS since 2019, until recently, its objectives have largely been obscured by seemingly indiscriminate violence. The church burnings in Chiúre may be the culmination of a strategic realignment that seeks to clarify the group's commitment to establishing an extreme idea of an Islamic state in Mozambique.

WHAT IS PHOTO REPORTS TELL US ABOUT THE CONFLICT

By Peter Bofin, ACLED

IS featured Mozambique across its media channels in February. The weekly al-Naba produced an infographic of ISM's activities from 26 December to 16 February, while IS also issued 13 claims for incidents over the month. More unusually, they also released five separate photo reports over the month, containing 94 photographs. The material presented gives us clues about the leadership and the importance of IS's jihadist ideology to ISM. We get a sense of current numbers, the resources at their disposal, and a sense of the relationship with IS media operations. We also get an insight into the conditions in which Mozambique's military operates.

One man appears in each of the three photo reports issued by IS to cover its actions in Chiúre during the month. A photograph taken in Muirota village on 15 February, judging by an earlier IS claim for an attack there, shows a masked man in military fatigues overseeing a beheading. On the stock of his rifle is written the name "Abuu Jafar." He appears again in a photograph taken in Samuel Magaia village on 17 February, again overseeing a beheading. The same man is seen in a photograph taken on 26 February in Monothe village. He stands outside a church with his foot on a cross and is flanked by three men, two of whom display a black and white IS flag. Little is known of ISM's leadership in the wake of the killing of Bonomade Machude Omar in [August 2023](#). However, this man's prominence in the photo reports indicates that he has a leadership position. What position he might hold is not known. Also in February, reports emerged of a leader with a similar name, Abdullahi Janfar Nurdin, referred to in [one report](#) as simply Janfar Nurdin. According to [Redactor newspaper](#), he is from Cabo Delgado and was manning a road block in Macomia on 11 February.

Photographs from Chiúre district projected IS's jihadist ideology. Almost 50% showed the destruction of churches, "Christian schools," and crosses. Six photographs were of beheadings of "Christians," overseen by "Abuu Jafar." In contrast, those from Macomia and Mecufi districts projected military power. Of the 51 photographs from the 30 January ambush of a joint FADM/Local Force patrol in Mecufi district and the 9 February attack on the Mucojo outpost, 22 depict victims.

The pictures from Mucojo confirm that a considerable well-armed force was deployed there. Local sources said that up to 150 fighters were involved. One photograph of fighters in a marching formation shows dozens. ISM is certainly stronger after the attacks. Pictures of weaponry seized during the two incidents show at least 19 light machine guns, 10 medium machine guns, and one heavy machine gun. At least five grenade launchers are also seen, as well as an array of ammunition.

Capturing such themes so clearly in such a short period of time indicates that there is effective communication with IS Central Media, which has [clear guidelines](#) for the types of images it can use. This is also seen in the al-Naba infographic, which presents details of events that corresponded closely to ACLED records for that period.

Finally, the Mucojo pictures give some insight into the conditions in which Mozambique's military operates. They seem as well equipped, in weaponry and battle dress, as their attackers and equally reliant on materials scavenged locally for shelter. One typical coastal bed strung with coconut rope is shown in a lean-to shelter made from a scavenged wooden door. What was perhaps most apparent was their absence in Chiúre district, through which ISM seemed to move freely in February.