Escaped girls tell of insurgents’ mass abductions in Mozambique

April 17, 2021

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The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/17/escaped-girls-tell-of-insurgents-mass-abductions-in-mozambique>

Insurgents in [Mozambique](https://www.theguardian.com/world/mozambique) have abducted hundreds of women and girls, forcing many into sexual relations with fighters and possibly trafficking others elsewhere in Africa, interviews with some who have escaped the extremists reveal.

Most of the abducted women are under 18, with the youngest about 12 years old. They are being held in a series of camps and bases across insurgent-controlled territory in north-eastern Mozambique.

Many are chosen by young fighters as “wives” and forced into sexual relations. Conditions are extremely harsh, with limited medical care, long marches under guard, unreliable food supplies and a constant risk of attacks by government forces or mercenaries.

The mass abductions recall that of more than 200 female students from a school in the town of[Chibok in Nigeria in 2014 by the Boko Haram group.](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/20/smuggled-diary-tells-how-abducted-women-survived-boko-haram-camp)Media attention, a Twitter campaign and interventions by celebrities led to the US and other western powers committing soldiers, intelligence specialists and substantial funds to the effort to rescue the young women.

The insurgency in Mozambique’s far north, which started four years ago, has killed thousands and displaced almost half a million people.

The interviews, conducted with 23 women last year by researchers from the *[Observatório do Meio Rural](https://omrmz.org/omrweb/publicacoes/or-109/%22%20%5Co%20%22)*(Rural Environment Observatory), a Mozambique-based thinktank, offer an unprecedented glimpse inside an opaque and little-known group.

“This is the first time we have heard from people who have been inside,” said Joe Hanlon, an expert on Mozambique at the London School of Economics. The research also casts new light on the leadership of the insurgents, and appears to undermine claims by the US government and others that they have close ties with [Islamic State](https://www.theguardian.com/world/isis).

João Feijó, author of [a report based on the interviews](https://omrmz.org/omrweb/publicacoes/or-109/), said that he believed more than 1,000 girls and young women had been abducted.

“These kinds of numbers would be a major logistic problem for the insurgents, and I believe that some girls have been trafficked. We have reports of women being selected to study English in neighbouring Tanzania, which sounds like a euphemism for being trafficked,” Feijó said.

“This report tell the story of those who ran away but doesn’t tell the story of those who are still there or who have been trafficked. Their voices are silent.”

The interviews reveal how only “young and attractive girls” are targeted by the insurgents. Those selected are known as “noodles”, a rare food seen as desirable, in contrast to “sorghum”, a staple, the women told researchers.

“Adolescent girls are the most favourite victims; other ages are spared,” one interviewee said.

In an attack last year on Mocímboa da Praia, a small coastal town still in the hands of insurgents, more than 300 women and girls were forced into trucks at gunpoint or marched from their homes.

One interviewee said that some people lost three to four children in the attack as the insurgents went “from house to house and captured the girls and took them away”.

Captive women are forced to attend “education” sessions of Qur’anic instruction and ideological lectures, according to the interviewees.

“They are given food, clothes and efforts are made to integrate them as ‘wives’. But this is not a choice. They are in a scenario of great violence and need food and security,” Feijó said.

A small number of women appear to have actively participated in military attacks, carrying weapons and choosing those who will be abducted.

The recent successes of the insurgents in Mozambique – whose organisation is known as both al-Shabaab and Ansar al-Sunna – have prompted global fears of a new extremist Islamist enclave in southern [Africa](https://www.theguardian.com/world/africa).

Factions affiliated to Isis and to al-Qaida have grown in strength across the continent in recent years, one of the few regions of the world where both have expanded.

Interviewees said that many of the leaders of the extremists in Mozambique were local men, but there were some foreigners from elsewhere on the east African coast, particularly Tanzania. There were also reports of South African nationals, Somalis and others presumed to be from Arab countries in Africa or the Middle East.

They also described the training of abducted teenage boys in the use of machetes and firearms.

One remembered seeing a 14-year-old boy going on his first mission.

“We saw him, all happy, telling the fighters how he had killed people. He had killed them with one shot and then he had beheaded them,” she said.

The question of Isis links among the insurgents in Mozambique is controversial. The militants were acknowledged as an official affiliate of Isis last year and in March the US state department designated what it called the “Islamic State of Iraq and Syria – Mozambique” as[a foreign terrorist organisation.](https://www.state.gov/state-department-terrorist-designations-of-isis-affiliates-and-leaders-in-the-democratic-republic-of-the-congo-and-mozambique/)

Some analysts attribute more effective tactics of insurgents in Mozambique to outside assistance. “In 2020, there was no doubt that they had international support … and there were many videos being shared where they were showing the Isis flag,” said Feijó.

Interviewees said the Isis flag was flown at insurgent bases and[Isis claimed the group’s most recent attack on the port of Palma.](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/29/isis-claims-deadly-attack-in-northern-mozambique)

But others worry that the US designation may be counterproductive.

“I think the links are very loose. The affiliation is a kind of public relations effort on both sides … If you really make [the insurgency] Isis and global you highlight it for global jihadis and for Isis,” said Hanlon.