Islamist group kills 52 in 'cruel and diabolical' Mozambique massacre

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/22/islamist-group-kills-52-in-cruel-and-diabolical-mozambique-massacre>

An Islamist extremist group in northern [Mozambique](https://www.theguardian.com/world/mozambique) has killed dozens of villagers in its most bloody attack.

More than 50 people were massacred in an attack in Xitaxi in Muidumbe district after locals refused to be recruited to its ranks, according to police cited by local media. Most were either shot dead or beheaded.

“The criminals tried to recruit young people to join their ranks, but there was resistance. This provoked the anger of the criminals, who indiscriminately killed – cruelly and diabolically – 52 young people,” police spokesman Orlando Mudumane told the state-owned broadcasting service.

The attack occurred more than two weeks ago but details have only emerged now.

Militants have stepped up attacks in recent weeks as part of a campaign to establish an Islamist caliphate in the gas-rich region, seizing government buildings, blocking roads and briefly hoisting a black-and-white flag carrying religious symbols over towns and villages across Cabo Delgado province. The flag is also used by Isis and other Islamic extremists.

In March, the insurgents briefly occupied the centre of Mocímboa da Praia, a district headquarters, burning government facilities, including a barracks, and brandishing banners of affiliation to the so-called [Islamic State](https://www.theguardian.com/world/isis).

A day later a second town was raided and the district police headquarters badly damaged. Those attackers too carried an Islamic State flag. Twenty to 30 members of Mozambique’s security forces were killed in both attacks, observers said.

Local security forces suffer from poor training, minimal equipment and low morale. Attempts to reinforce with expensive foreign mercenaries do not appear to have been effective.

[At least 150 Russians linked to the Wagner Group](https://edition.cnn.com/2019/11/29/africa/russian-mercenaries-mozambique-intl/index.html), a company that has supplied mercenaries to fight in several African countries, were deployed last year but were forced to withdraw after suffering casualties.

The insurgency in the remote north began to grow about two years ago, exploiting widespread anger at the failure of central government to fairly distribute earnings from exploitation of the region’s rich natural resources. Discontent was exacerbated by endemic corruption and a brutal, indiscriminate military response to the violence.

The insurgents have so far mainly targeted isolated villages, killing more than 900 people, according to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (Acled).

The unrest has forced hundreds of thousands of locals to flee and raised concern among big energy firms operating in the region.

More than 200,000 people have fled the area hit worst by the violence, according to a local Catholic archbishop, Dom Luiz Fernando.

Some have sought refuge among friends and relatives in the port city of Pemba, the capital of Cabo Delgado.

An organisation calling itself Islamic State Central [Africa](https://www.theguardian.com/world/africa) Province (ISCAP), affiliated with Isis, has claimed some of the attacks in the region since last year.

The insurgents are known locally as al-Shabaab (“the youth”), although they have no known links to the extremist group of that name operating in Somalia.

The massacre happened on the same day, 7 April, that local sources in Muidumbe told AFP that militants went on a rampage, burning bridge construction equipment and ransacking schools, hospitals and a bank. Before the raid, the attackers used loudhailers to warn villagers “not to run away but stay inside the house”, the source said.

In the same district, the militants recorded a video of themselves addressing locals in the region’s local vernacular of Kimwani and Swahili.

Experts say there is “no quick fix” to the problems underlying the insurgency.

“Most importantly, the Mozambican military and security forces need to be restructured … They now face a complex, multilayered and asymmetrical conflict, mostly drawing upon local and regional grievances and networks but increasingly also attracting some limited encouragement and advice from further afield,” [Alex Vines, the director of the Africa programme at Chatham House, wrote last month.](https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/why-insurgency-northern-mozambique-has-got-worse)