



15 April 2021

Cabo Ligado Monthly: March 2021

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

VITAL STATS

- ACLED recorded 34 organized political violence events in March, resulting in 116 fatalities
- Over half the fatalities from the violence took place in Palma district, where insurgents invaded Palma town on 24 March and contested control of the town into April
- Other events took place in Macomia and Nangade districts

VITAL TRENDS

- Fatality numbers for March are still provisional, as no one has yet made a clear accounting of deaths in the battle for Palma
- At the same time as the attack on Palma, insurgents reasserted themselves in coastal Macomia district, launching deadly attacks on fishermen in and around the village of Macomia
- The United States (US) dramatically increased its role in the conflict, sanctioning the Cabo Delgado insurgents as a wing of the Islamic State (IS), naming Abu Yasir Hassan as the group’s leader, and publicly acknowledging a Special Forces training mission in Mozambique

IN THIS REPORT

- Analysis of the IS claim of the Palma attack in the context of the overall relationship between IS and the Cabo Delgado insurgency
- Discussion of growing tensions between displaced people, host communities, and aid organizations in districts with growing displaced populations
- Update on international involvement in the Cabo Delgado conflict and analysis of the role that South African companies Dyck Advisory Group and Paramount Group play in the conflict

MARCH SITUATION SUMMARY

March 2021 began on an optimistic note for residents of Palma town, and ended on a disastrous one. Palma has been an indirect target for insurgents for months, as frequent attacks along the R763 between Palma and Nangade had cut off land access routes necessary to supply the town. The supply situation in Palma was dire at the end of February, with food prices spiking dangerously and widespread hunger reported. By the first week of March, the government and Total had worked out a method for resupplying the town by sea, offering hope of durable relief for residents. Food prices [halved](#) in the week after the first shipment.

Those supply arrangements, plus the lack of insurgent attacks near the Total liquified natural gas project site

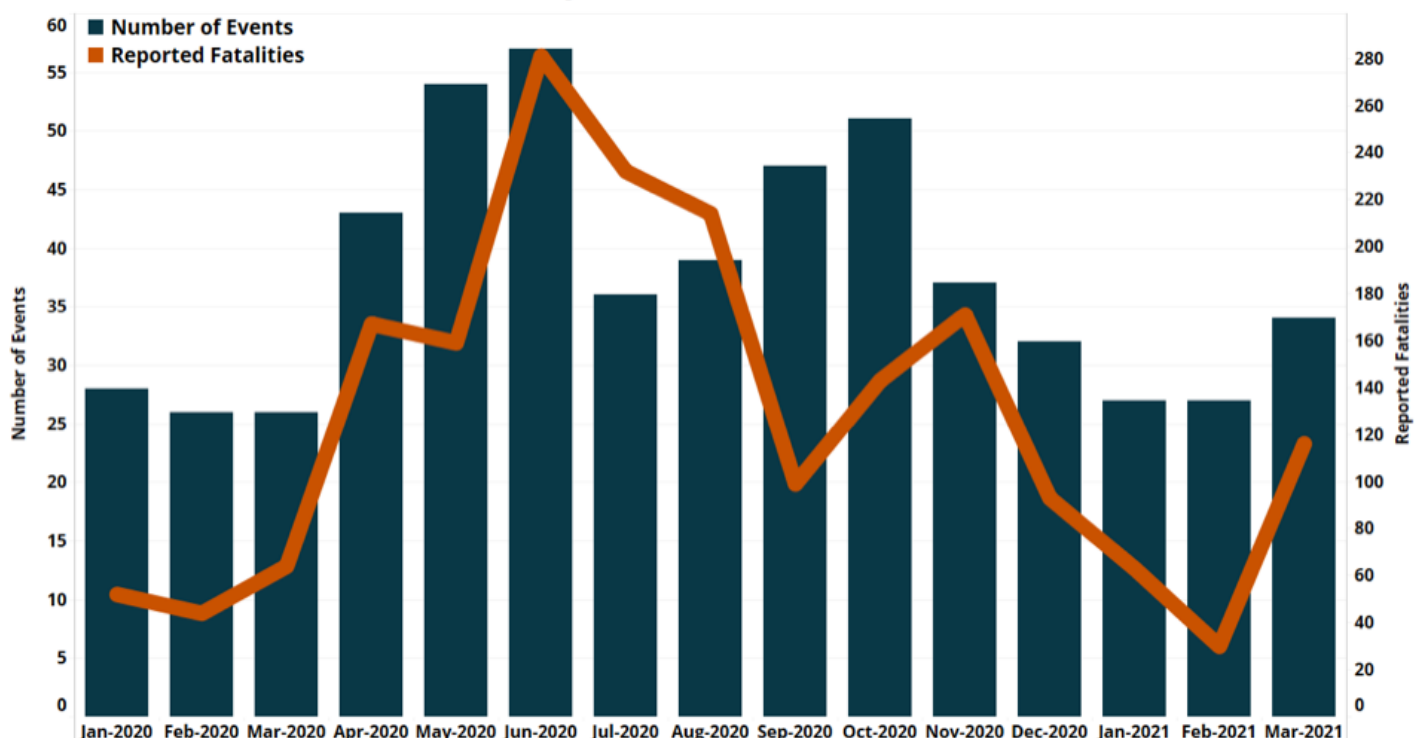
since early January and a modified security agreement between Total and the Mozambican government, seemed to suggest a return to normal operations around Palma town might be possible. Total and the Mozambican energy ministry jointly announced that construction work at the Total project site would resume before the end of March. Work on the project had been suspended since an insurgent attack at the resettlement village of Quitunda in January.

On 24 March, the day Total was scheduled to resume operations, with the town adequately supplied for the first time in weeks, insurgents attacked. The attack was the first major insurgent operation since the end of the rainy season lull in the fighting, and it appeared to catch government forces by surprise. Insurgent fighters entered the town from three sides, killing, kidnapping, and looting as they went. The full death toll is not yet clear, but a subsequent claim by IS said that insurgents had killed 55 in the fighting. The government has since estimated that rebuilding the infrastructure damaged in the town will cost over \$113 million.

Even with government control of the town largely restored in April, the ongoing costs of the attack are astronomical. The attack displaced [over](#) 38,000 people, some to other districts and most to the area around the Total work site, where humanitarian agencies have had great difficulties in reaching them. Total has abandoned its plans to return to work on the site for now, and has evacuated the vast majority of its employees from Palma district. It is unclear when and how the district's economic and social systems will recover.

The other major event in the Cabo Delgado conflict in March was the arrival of the US as a major player in security cooperation with the Mozambican government. The US government announced its intent to increase its involvement in the conflict with sanctions designations against the Cabo Delgado insurgents — which it termed “ISIS-Mozambique” — and a man it described as the insurgent leader, Abu Yasir Hassan. Shortly thereafter, the US also announced a Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET) program that brought US Green Berets to Mozambique to train Mozambican troops in counterterrorism tactics. The 2021 JCET was not the first such mission during the Cabo Delgado conflict, but it was the first to be publicly acknowledged, indicating the expanding working relationship between the US and Mozambican governments.

**Armed, Organized Violent Events and Reported Fatalities in Cabo Delgado
(Jan 2020 - Mar 2021)**



THE ISLAMIC STATE, THE CABO DELGADO INSURGENCY, AND THE PALMA ATTACK

Following the 24 March insurgent attack on Palma town, IS attempted to reassert its role in the Cabo Delgado insurgency. In a 28 March statement, the group claimed the Palma attack as an IS operation and asserted that the group had killed 55 people, a mix of Mozambican troops and other Christians. It was the group's first claim of an attack by Mozambican insurgents since last November. The statement arrived with accompanying photos and videos, depicting insurgents milling about. Though ostensibly footage taken from the Palma attack, geolocation by independent experts shows that the images were taken in Mocimboa da Praia, less than 80 kilometers to the south, [likely](#) in the run up to the Palma raid.

The footage — both what was released and what was missing — is an important marker of the state of the relationship between IS and the Cabo Delgado insurgency. On one hand, it indicates the continued closeness of the two groups. Insurgents are clearly still working to produce propaganda for IS. Women who had escaped insurgent captivity and were [interviewed](#) by the Rural Environment Observatory reported that there were dedicated communications specialists among the insurgents who “record everything.” Their footage rarely reaches the outside world, but one insurgent told a woman that the films are “very important, because we can use it later.” The footage shot before the Palma attack was put to use in the IS claim, and it appears very likely that it was meant to be paired with footage of the attack itself or its aftermath, as has been included in some earlier IS claims of Cabo Delgado attacks.

Images from the attack may yet appear on IS channels. Cellular service was down in Palma district from the initial attack until 13 April, when Vodacom came back [online](#). In a longer article about the attack published in al-Naba on 1 April, IS accused government forces of cutting off communication networks in the area “to conceal its huge losses” in the attack, which may have served as an excuse for the lack of IS footage available to that point. Since the restoration of Vodacom service, some images of the aftermath of the attack have appeared in the form of a short video of unknown provenance showing 12 bodies underneath a tree near the Am- arula Palma Hotel. It appears to be the same tree next to which police [claimed](#) to have buried 12 white people who had been massacred by insurgents.

Yet even if images of the Palma attacks ultimately end up in future IS publications, the clear difficulty Cabo Delgado insurgents have connecting with the propaganda wings of the central IS organization indicate the remove at which the Cabo Delgado insurgency operates. Neither side has invested the resources necessary to overcome a predictable communications blackout following the attack, and insurgents' strategic decisions appear as driven by local concerns as ever. The attack on Palma (and simultaneous [attacks](#) along the Macomia coast) demonstrated the insurgency's tactical nous — which has been improving since the insurgency's association with IS became public knowledge — but did not represent any strategic shift toward the interests of IS central. The Total project site on Afungi was left untouched once again, and to date only three foreigners — a Briton, a South African, and a Zimbabwean — have been confirmed killed in the attack. In short, there is no evidence from the Palma attack that IS controls the strategic direction of the insurgency.

This situation likely suits IS. As a recent Hudson Institute [article](#) points out, the group has been quite content to defer to local expertise and aspirations among its affiliates. Surveying IS affiliate groups around the world, the authors find that IS central avoids principal-agent problems with many of its affiliates by simply not attempting to control the agent groups. Instead, IS offers hard-won knowledge and resources to budding insurgencies in exchange for local groups promoting the idea of IS as a global organization.

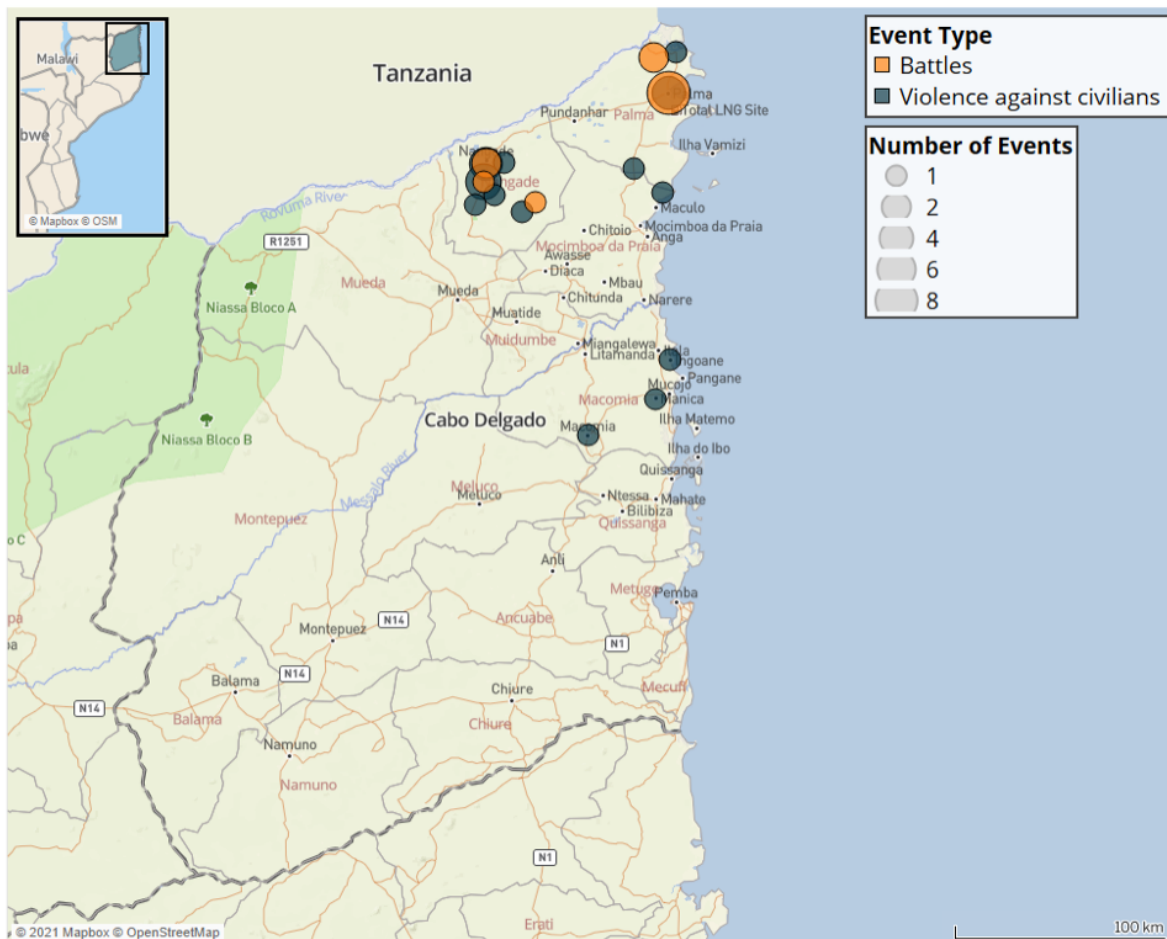
The Cabo Delgado insurgents, and the Palma attack in particular, have created a great deal of value for IS in the branding department already. In addition to widespread international news coverage of the attack and

the subsequent IS claim, the strike on Palma has appeared in IS propaganda from outside of its Central African Province. A recent IS [release](#) from its affiliate in the Sinai peninsula shows Sinai militants reading the IS statement about the Palma attack, underlining the IS narrative that its affiliates are all involved in one, interconnected struggle.

IS alluded to that same narrative in the al-Naba article on the attack. The group made sure to mock analysts who claimed to be unsure if Cabo Delgado insurgents are affiliated with IS, writing that such questions could only be the result of Western “embarrassment” at the scale of the insurgent victory. Even with the group’s limited capacity to influence events in Mozambique, emphasizing the connections that do exist between IS and the Cabo Delgado insurgency remains a high priority for IS propagandists. Doing so extends the perceived reach of IS and bolsters its claim to be the connective tissue between local Islamist militancy and a global struggle against “Crusader” states.

Over the course of the conflict, the approach the Mozambican government and international community take to addressing the insurgency will go a long way toward determining the effectiveness of the IS narrative in Mozambique. If the anti-insurgent coalition treats the insurgency as primarily a front in a global war against IS, it will strengthen the IS argument that the group gives meaning to local struggles in Mozambique and around the world. If instead the anti-insurgent coalition can focus on separating IS and local insurgents by exploiting the natural tensions between the global and local ambitions of the two groups, it might find a path toward ending the conflict and strike a blow against IS messaging at the same time.

Armed, Organized Violence in Cabo Delgado (March 2021)



TENSIONS BETWEEN IDPS AND HOST COMMUNITIES

As the displacement crisis in Cabo Delgado has worsened, much of the onus of caring for displaced people has fallen on host communities. With the Mozambican government underprepared to respond to a calamity of this scale and the international community hamstrung by a combination of budget restrictions and foot dragging by local partners, regular Mozambicans have had to fill in the gaps by feeding and housing people fleeing from violence in northeast Cabo Delgado. Given the number of gaps that need filling — nearly one in three Cabo Delgado residents are now displaced by the conflict, and even among the most recently displaced, 70% are living [within](#) host communities — it is remarkable how functional and peaceful the grassroots response to the crisis has been thus far.

However, cracks are beginning to show. During March, tensions around displaced people living in host communities have grown, particularly in southwestern districts where IDP populations have rapidly increased recently. The tensions are not, by and large, between IDPs and host community residents directly; the kinship and mutual aid networks that have made the grassroots response to the Cabo Delgado displacement crisis possible are not yet breaking down. Instead, the disagreements in Chiure and Ancuabe districts about providing for IDPs are mostly between residents and institutions charged with supporting those grassroots networks, such as local government officials and aid agencies.

In Chiure district, the total estimated IDP population in [May 2020](#) was 2,125. By [February 2021](#), there were an estimated 12,600 IDPs living in six relocation sites in Chiure, and the district was hosting about as many IDPs as [Mueda district](#), a government military stronghold. In March, the difficulties involved in supporting such a massive population increase began to wear on both Chiure residents and humanitarian institutions. The biggest flashpoint was food distribution. Displaced people and host families complained that the lists governing distribution of aid from the World Food Program were incomplete and subject to corruption. It is often difficult for newly-arriving IDPs to get on the lists, which are governed, at least in part, by local authorities. Delays can be dramatic: many IDPs staying in the Nahavara area of Chiure district had been waiting as long as four months for their first WFP aid. The people who control the lists also often put non-displaced members of their own networks on the list, as a form of patronage.

Distribution problems had become so bad by the end of the month that unknown parties stole from the WFP warehouse in Chiure. The thieves made off with 500 kilograms of rice and 25 gallons of cooking oil, despite the warehouse being guarded by both police and private security. There is no indication that there was any insurgent involvement in the heist. Instead, it was likely either an attempt to re-sell the food on the black market or to circumvent normal aid distribution measures. Either way, it indicates a sub-optimal distribution model.

Frustration over food aid in Chiure bubbled over into low-level violence in early April, when someone involved in distributing food in Namiuta, Chiure district, was beaten for accusing some of the people on the list of not being displaced.

In Ancuabe district, the IDP population in [May 2020](#) was 4,299 and by [February 2021](#) there were over 16,000 people living in six relocation sites and the total IDP population in the district was [on par](#) with that of Metuge district. Ancuabe has experienced the same food distribution problems as Chiure, with accusations of corruption common in the district. There were also direct recriminations between IDPs and host communities in March, when some Ancuabe residents accused IDPs of preventing rainfall on crops through supernatural means.

These problems are not dissimilar to those [identified](#) in areas that have been hosting large numbers of IDPs for longer, such as Pemba district. Relying on the local government for IDP registration in Pemba led to widespread corruption accusations just like the ones recorded in Chiure and Ancuabe. The patronage networks of

local leaders receive preferred access to aid, while displaced people with less access to those networks have a more difficult time accessing the aid that is meant for them. These problems are magnified in more rural contexts like Chiure and Ancuabe, where IDPs may live much further from aid distribution centers and it is relatively easy for local leaders to secretly stockpile aid. Local leaders are likely to remain a crucial element in the aid distribution process, given their roles as government stakeholders. However, the more WFP and other aid distributors can involve displaced people themselves in a [participatory](#) distribution process, the more that process will be able to adapt itself to the needs of the grassroots systems of care that have sprung up to attend to displaced people in Cabo Delgado.

INTERNATIONAL UPDATE AND REFLECTIONS ON DYCK ADVISORY GROUP'S MISSION TO CABO DELGADO

The US Special Forces JCET mission in Mozambique received considerable [media attention](#) this month, leading some to believe that this was directly related to the deteriorating security situation on the ground. Instead, the mission forms part of a longer term and evolving counterterrorism relationship between the US and Mozambique. The US Embassy in Maputo issued a [statement](#) on 15 March, which followed the US designation of “ISIS-Mozambique” as a foreign terrorist organization on 11 March, explaining the two month training programme for Mozambican marines is part of “a multi-faceted and holistic approach to counter and prevent the spread of terrorism and violent extremism. This approach addresses socio-economic development issues as well as the security situation. Civilian protection, human rights, and community engagement are central to US co-operation and foundational to effectively counter Islamic State in Mozambique.”

The European Union (EU) continues to refine its thinking towards the development of a support package for Mozambique's efforts to address the crisis specifically in Cabo Delgado and in Mozambique more generally. An internal EU working document known as a “Political Framework for Crisis Approach,” developed after discussions with the government of Mozambique, provides a framework of engagement. The EU is exploring several options, including:

- (i) a military training mission, that is likely to build on the expanded training program provided by Portugal that is in the process of getting off the ground, with associated equipment provision;
- (ii) an extension of the [EUNAVFOR Atalanta](#), the EU's maritime security strategy off the Horn of Africa, focused on strengthening maritime security in Mozambique's territorial waters; and
- (iii) building support for dialogue and mediation, which includes support for the reconciliation process with Renamo.

Key aspects of assessing conditions on the ground are ongoing and the impact of recent developments relating to Palma and the immediate deterioration in security and humanitarian conditions is likely to increase pressure for action. Much depends, however, on how Mozambique and the region respond, especially in a context of increasing pressure from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) for Maputo to provide a coherent strategy for external parties to work with.

In response to the attack on Palma, the African Union issued a [statement](#) on 31 March calling for “an urgent and coordinated regional and international action to address this new threat to our common security.” The continental body is looking for direction from SADC on how best to respond to the situation. SADC, which has been trying to push Maputo to convene a dedicated summit on the crisis in Cabo Delgado, was able to secure a meeting of its Double Troika on 8 April, the outcome of which will be explored in ACLED's April monthly report.

Dyck Advisory Group in Cabo Delgado

After a year of operations in Cabo Delgado, Dyck Advisory Group (DAG) flew its last surveillance and combat

operations on 4 April in the aftermath of the insurgent attack on Palma. The controversial private military contractor's contract officially ended on 6 April. The DAG team, operating six light helicopters converted into gunships, has been [praised](#) for its heroics at Palma, using all manner of innovations to source fuel to fly multiple rescue sorties, often under fire. This saved the lives of several hundred people, mainly expatriates, trapped in the crosshairs of the deadly insurgent attack.

In the short-term, DAG's drawdown exacerbates insecurity in Cabo Delgado. A number of security analysts believe allowing DAG's contract to lapse and their operations to cease is an irresponsible decision by the government. The government's decision says more about internal Mozambican security politics and external pressures than the need to address security realities on the ground. The Mozambican police (PRM), with whom DAG was contracted, retained a point role in the security forces' counterinsurgency efforts until a range of factors led to their replacement by the military in the first weeks of 2021. Despite this — and a raft of new appointments at the top of the Mozambican military's (FADM) command structure — there apparently is still no integrated command structure in place between the police and military. Moves in this direction are likely to be a key priority for the new leadership. The current absence of such a command reflects the paucity of an integrated security strategy that connects land, sea, and air components.

The FADM is now in charge and if the Palma debacle is anything to go by both in terms of the defense of the town and the subsequent efforts to take back the town, the FADM has some way to go before it is fit for purpose. This of course is why there has been several months of effort to source support for new equipment and training for the army, and why the South African Paramount Group recently [bought into](#) Burnham Global, a Dubai based firm that “specializes in providing a range of training solutions to security services” to create its new training division, [Paramount Advanced Training and Support](#). Paramount is now contracted to the FADM on a twelve-month contract to build air force and armored vehicle ground capacity. The extent to which this will enhance FADM operations has yet to be seen.

DAG's swansong in Palma is bittersweet for the company. While it secured recognition for its good work in the Palma rescue operations, it is also in the crosshairs of international opprobrium following the release of an Amnesty International (AI) [report](#) on 2 March that accused them of indiscriminately firing on civilians. Unsurprisingly, DAG have denied the allegations and have instituted an internal investigation into the allegations. That inquiry is unlikely to convince many of DAG's innocence, given the company's control over the process, but its outcome may still be of interest. DAG has [claimed](#) it was integrated into the PRM command, that it received targeting instructions from the PRM, and had PRM officials on board helicopters during operations. The Mozambican authorities have shied away from engaging with the specific AI allegations, although previously had claimed allegations levelled at its security forces by human rights organizations were fabricated.

As DAG came to the end of its contract period, it also witnessed the first combat experience of a PRM paramilitary unit it had trained as part of its contract. DAG trainers from South Africa worked with a 120 man team from the PRM's Rapid Intervention Unit (UIR), training them in an array of counterinsurgency techniques in the latter half of 2020. The team, which was ready for deployment from late January, had been effectively left on the sidelines of subsequent FADM led operations in Cabo Delgado. However, a group of 40 trainees were deployed in Palma on 29 March and demonstrated the effectiveness of their training as they helped retake the town.

Those 120 police may be the only enduring legacy of a strategic plan for the Cabo Delgado conflict that centered on DAG. The training program was part of a wider plan by DAG to develop a “fireforce” capacity of air assault troops that could lead attacks supported by the company's air assets; a counterinsurgency methodology pioneered during the war in Rhodesia with devastating effect. The training plan had included deploying members of the South African training team to deploy alongside trainees as combat advisors. The police did not have helicopter troop carrying capacity, and DAG encouraged the repair of two Mi8 transport helicopters that would be fit for purpose. The Mi8s, however, were FADM property, and although one of them was repaired,

it was never feasible that the military would hand it over to DAG.

In December, DAG's contract was again extended, by which time Paramount were already providing training and hardware to the FADM. By January 2021, however, the PRM were being replaced in the counterinsurgency leadership role, and DAG was scheduled to stand down by early April. In the wake of the Palma attack, there was considerable chatter that the contract would again be temporarily extended as the FADM helicopter force being trained by Paramount was not ready. But this has not transpired, with worrying potential consequences.

There is no operational aerial surveillance and combat capacity to replace DAG in the short term; the substitute Mozambican air force teams – helicopter gunships sourced by Paramount – are not yet in the field. When exactly they and the supporting infrastructure will be ready remains unclear; Paramount has sold the FADM four Gazelle helicopters, converted to gunships and fitted with equipment to enable night operations. Mozambican air force pilots and gunners have been trained in South Africa — they are competent crews, but have no combat experience and it is unclear if they will receive any mentorship. Paramount has also sourced a small number of Mi24s and Mi17s, heavy duty Soviet-era gunships flown by Mozambican pilots trained by the Soviets and Russians, and now mentored by Ukrainians in the interim.

While there is some eye-in-the-sky capacity in the form of drone and satellite support, even if the new air force teams are in place soon, they are likely to face serious challenges maximising their potential. Throughout its contract, DAG faced supply and logistical challenges, some of which improved, but not systematically. In the days following 24 March, their potential was acutely compromised by the absence of a reliable fuel supply near Palma. This and other frustrations with sourcing ammunition were a recurring theme during their deployment. Will the FADM be able to ensure these deficits are addressed through their channels? Will it be able to provide appropriate security for the ground teams being prepared for its new helicopter gunships? Will its operations be integrated effectively with land and coastal security operations, and with the PRM? How will they deal with militias operating in several affected districts? These remain major unanswered questions in the current circumstances.

Many Cabo Delgado watchers concur that hiring DAG was far from ideal, but in the circumstances, they do not agree with US State Department posturing in March that claimed “the presence of those entities (i.e. private military contractors) has not demonstrably helped the government of Mozambique in countering the terrorist threat in Mozambique.” While DAG's presence in Cabo Delgado coincided with a major deterioration in terms of security, most agree the government's capacity to counter the insurgency would have been far less without them. DAG did provide a rotary wing capacity that enabled government security forces to score victories in important situations, including in Metuge district, as insurgents were pushing toward Pemba. Their work, however, took place in the absence of a broader strategic framework and, according to credible accusations that DAG specifically denies, without proper considerations to prevent civilian casualties. A much deeper dive is required to assess the true costs and benefits of DAG's contribution, not only in terms of what it achieved, but also what it may have prevented. This must include a fair and transparent investigation of how the company addressed human rights considerations in its operations.