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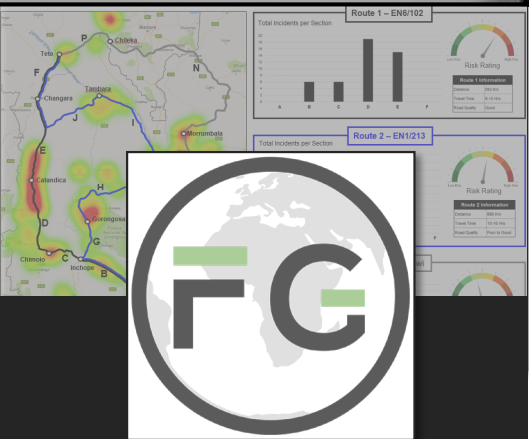
# MOZAMBIQUE

MACOMIA TOWN ATTACK – MAY 2024

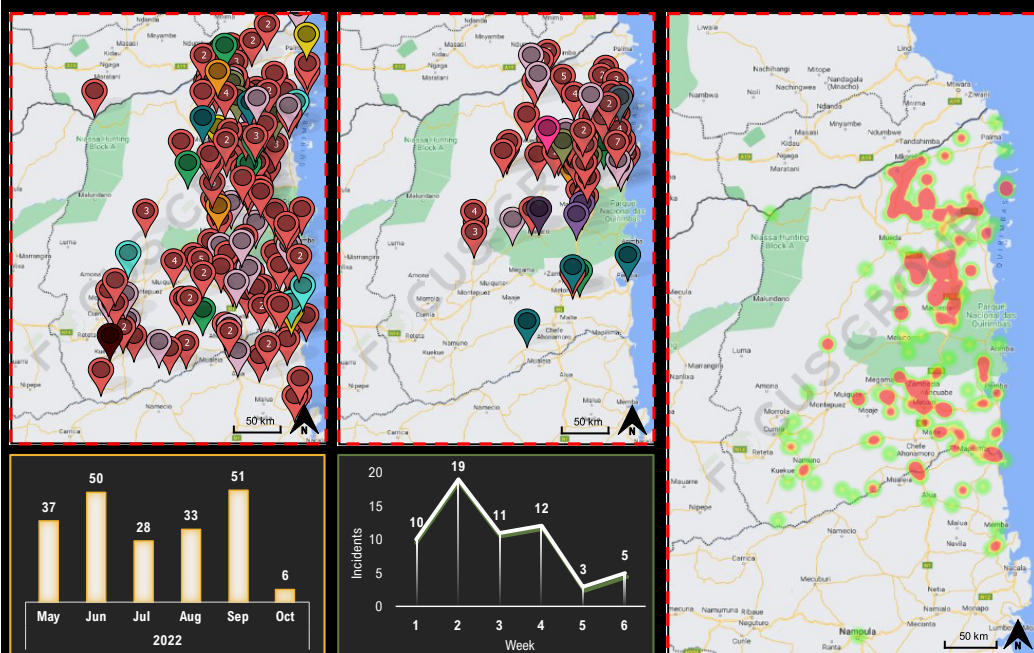


23 July 2024

# Our Services



| Year | Total Incidents | Militant-Orchestrated |
|------|-----------------|-----------------------|
| 2021 | 548             | 271                   |
| 2022 | 501             | 664                   |
| 2023 | 216             | 119                   |



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# OVERVIEW

The 10 May insurgent-led attack on Macomia Town emphasised the insurgency’s sustained ability to carry out large-scale attacks in the conflict zone. Despite the presence of international military contingents providing support to government forces since mid-2021, the insurgency has continued to launch attacks in the various districts of Cabo Delgado Province, even repeatedly venturing southwards near the border with Nampula Province and, at times, spilling over into the neighbouring province (see **Figure 1**).

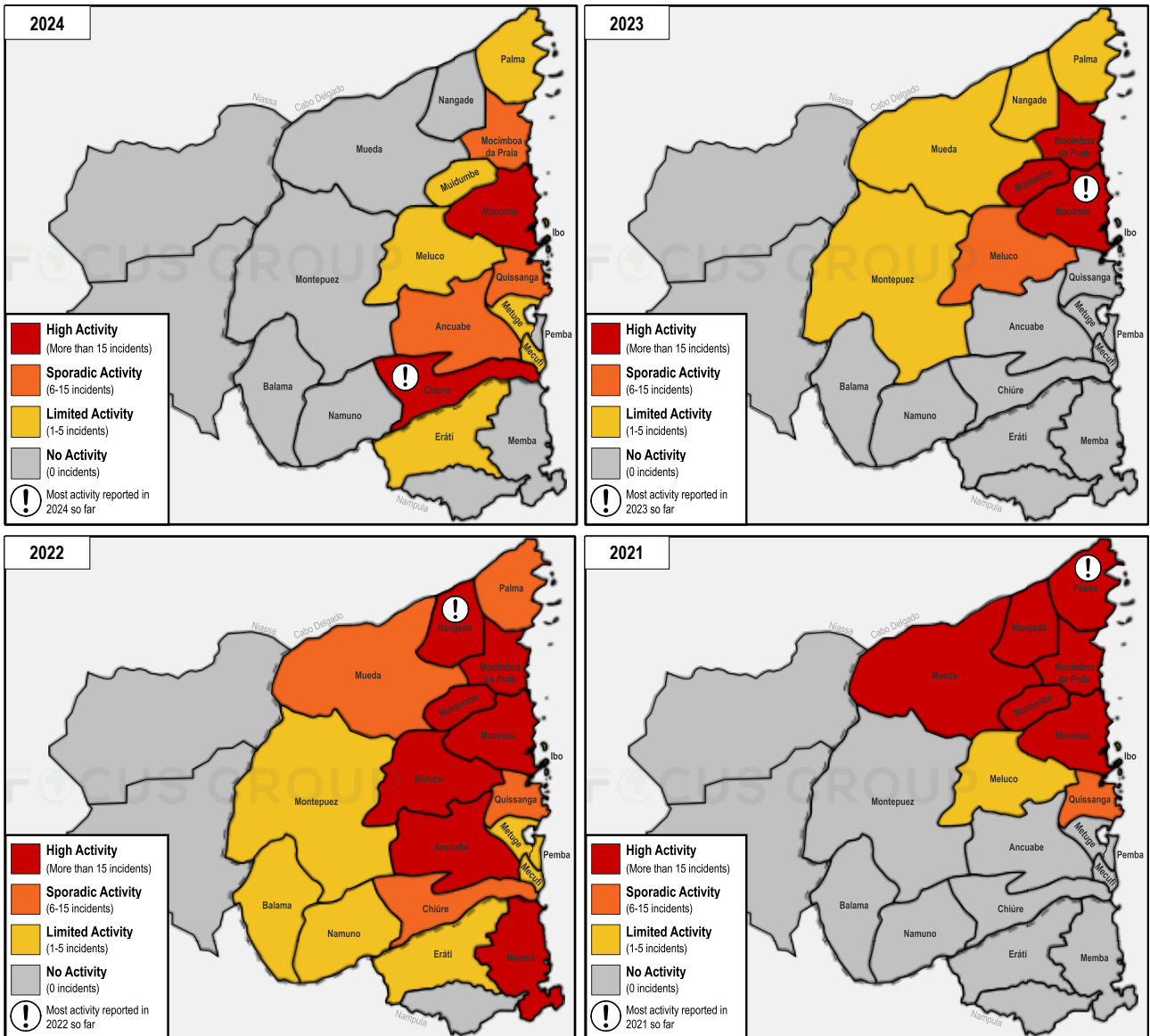


Figure 1: Security Incidents per District between 2021 and 2024.

Additionally, the insurgents proved that despite the deployment of contingents of the Mozambique Armed Defence Forces (Forças Armadas de Defesa de Moçambique – FADM) as well as an, albeit small, contingent of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM) in Macomia Town, the insurgents were willing and able to launch a multi-pronged attack on the town, overrunning the security forces. Moreover, the insurgents managed to subsequently occupy the town for more than 24 hours and

ultimately withdrew from the town and returned to their camps along Macomia District's coast with relative ease – and without an effective response from any of the three security force role-players, including the Rwandan Security Forces (RSF).

While the deployment of foreign troops greatly assisted in initially curbing the insurgency's momentum, especially after the attack on Palma Town in March 2021 (see **Focus Group's Special Report on the Palma Attack**) and improving the security situation in certain parts of the region, the insurgency has persisted. The attack on Macomia Town highlights that, since its inception in 2017, the insurgency has evolved within the conflict zone and adapted its strategies to react to the increased military deployment. From tactics that caused a high number of civilian casualties, the insurgency has adjusted its strategy to one in which it increasingly targets the security forces and those deemed the insurgency's "enemies". The shift in focus, especially the limiting of civilian casualties, coincides with an apparent insurgent hearts and minds campaign, focused particularly on Northern Mozambique's Muslim population.

With the SAMIM concluding its withdrawal process in July 2024, and the security forces from Tanzania and Rwanda remaining to assist the FADM, it is conceivable that the insurgency will take advantage of a reduced security deployment to increase its activities in the region. However, information also points to an expansion of Rwandan forces, presenting uncertainty over what might lie ahead for the insurgents and the region's security situation.

This report provides an overview of the Macomia Town attack timeline and discusses the outlook for the active conflict zone in the short to medium term.

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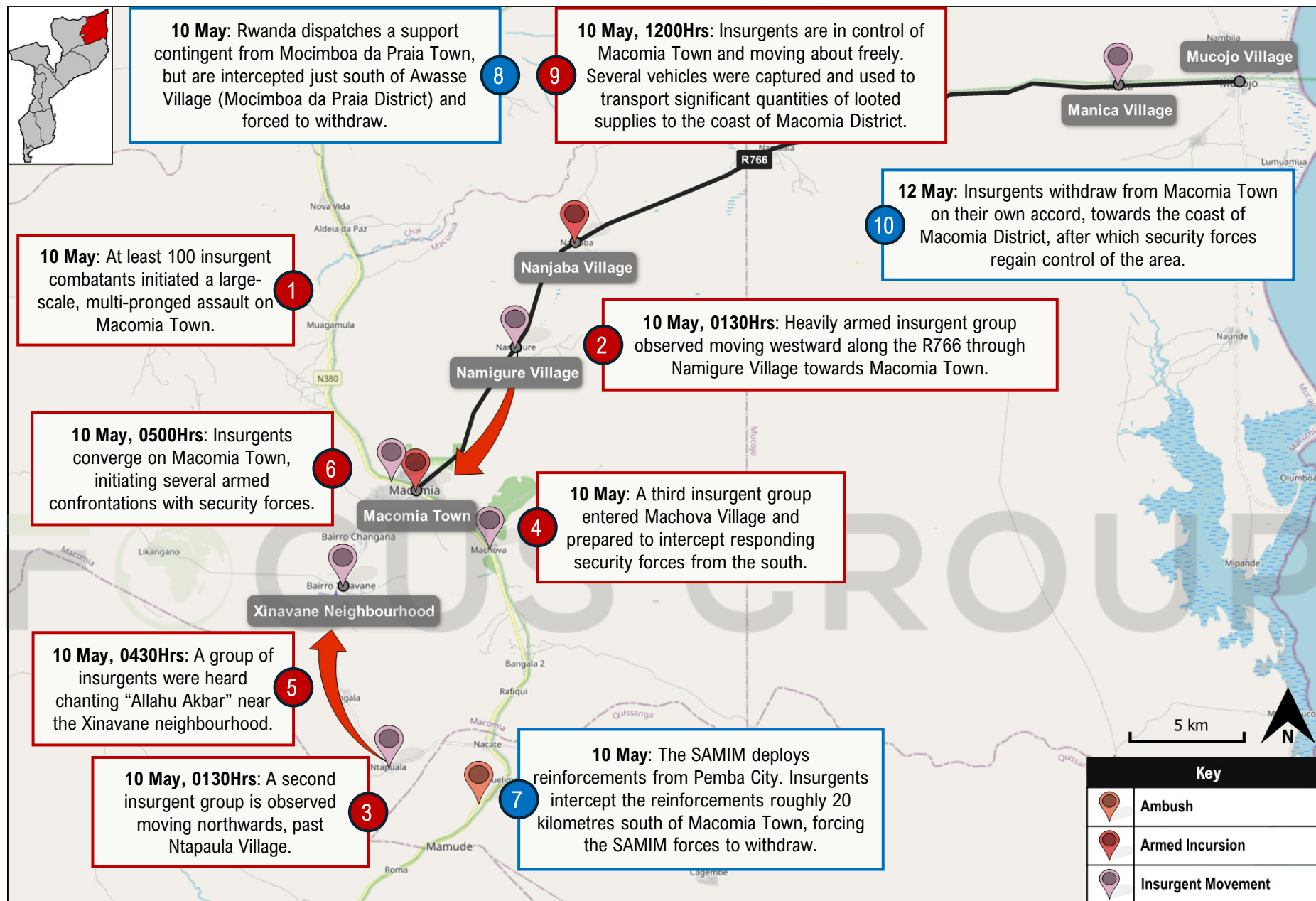


Figure 2: Incident timeline of the multi-pronged attack on Macomia Town.

## SEQUENCE OF EVENTS

**10 May 2024**

### **Insurgent-Led Attack on Macomia Town Initiated**

Insurgent group observed moving westward along the R766 through Namigure Village (Macomia District) – located eight kilometres northeast of Macomia Town.

**0130Hrs**

Second insurgent group observed moving northwards near Ntapaula Village (Macomia District).

Third insurgent group enters Machova Village (Macomia District) – four kilometres southeast of Macomia Town – and prepares for an ambush on responding security forces.

**0430Hrs**

A group of insurgents heard shouting “Allahu Akbar” (God is Great) in Macomia Town’s Xinavane neighbourhood. Similarly, a fourth insurgent group was positioned in the northern parts of Macomia Town, at the bridge over the Napacala River.

Insurgents converge on Macomia Town, initiating an armed confrontation from four directions and targeting the following military positions:

- The Police of the Republic of Mozambique (Polícia da República de Moçambique – PRM) comprising a contingent of the Rapid Intervention Unit (Unidade Intervenção Rápida – UIR) as well as the border police stationed in the Nanga A neighbourhood.
- The FADM contingent stationed in the Xinavane neighbourhood.
- A UIR contingent stationed in the Changana neighbourhood.
- The substation in Nanjaba Village (about 15 kilometres northeast of Macomia Town).

**0500Hrs**

**to**

**1100Hrs**

Insurgents managed to overrun most of the targets aside from the FADM contingent in Xinavane leading to a prolonged armed confrontation. After an initial 45-minute battle, some of the insurgent groups withdrew temporarily, regrouped, and resumed their offensive on the town. While most of the SAMIM troops had already left the town shortly before the incursion, a small contingent remained in Macomia Town. Although the insurgents targeted all the other security positions in and around the town, the insurgents appeared to be aware of the location of the remaining SAMIM troops, and seemingly avoided them.

0500Hrs  
to  
1100Hrs

The attack prompted SAMIM reinforcements to be deployed from Pemba City, with a RSF contingent also being sent from Mocímboa da Praia Town (Mocímboa da Praia District).

SAMIM forces were ambushed near Machova Village after a ground-based explosive disabled two Casspir armoured personnel carriers (APCs). The ambush occurred about 20 kilometres southeast of Macomia Town and resulted in an armed confrontation lasting for three and a half hours, severely depleting the SAMIM soldiers' ammunition. Reinforcements and ammunition were reportedly flown to the ambushed SAMIM contingent via a South African Air Force (SAAF) Oryx helicopter. However, by the end of 10 May, the responding SAMIM forces were still trying to reach the SAMIM base in Macomia Town.

The RSF contingent was ambushed along the EN380 between Macomia Town and Awasse, forcing the contingent to return to Mocímboa da Praia Town.

1200Hrs

Insurgents partially occupy and take control of Macomia Town – save for the Xinavane FADM position. During their occupation of the town, insurgents looted the town's market and houses, and destroyed infrastructure. At least 16 vehicles were stolen, including vehicles belonging to the Doctors Without Borders (Médecins Sans Frontières – MSF), the Mozambican Red Cross, and the World Food Programme (WFP). The vehicles were used to transport the looted goods to insurgent camps along Macomia District's coast.

The insurgents also kidnapped at least nine non-governmental organisations (NGOs) employees, who were later held for ransom.

While in the town, the insurgents distributed looted food to the population and held meetings with the local community, during which they apologised for the civilian injuries caused by the attack.

12 May 2024

### Withdrawal from Macomia Town

The insurgents voluntarily withdrew from the town, transporting substantial amounts of looted food products in stolen trucks and Light-Duty Vehicles (LDVs) towards Mucojo Town.

12 May 2024

### Screening Operation by Security Forces

Following the attack, residents who fled returned to the village and reported that the security forces were screening all returning residents, and that surveillance was being carried out from house to house.



**14 May 2024****| Insurgents Set Up Roadblock**

Following the attack, insurgents established a traffic control point on the R766 between Macomia Town and Mucojo Village, near Nanjaba Village with insurgents being observed near Manica Village in Macomia District.

## HOW DID THIS HAPPEN?

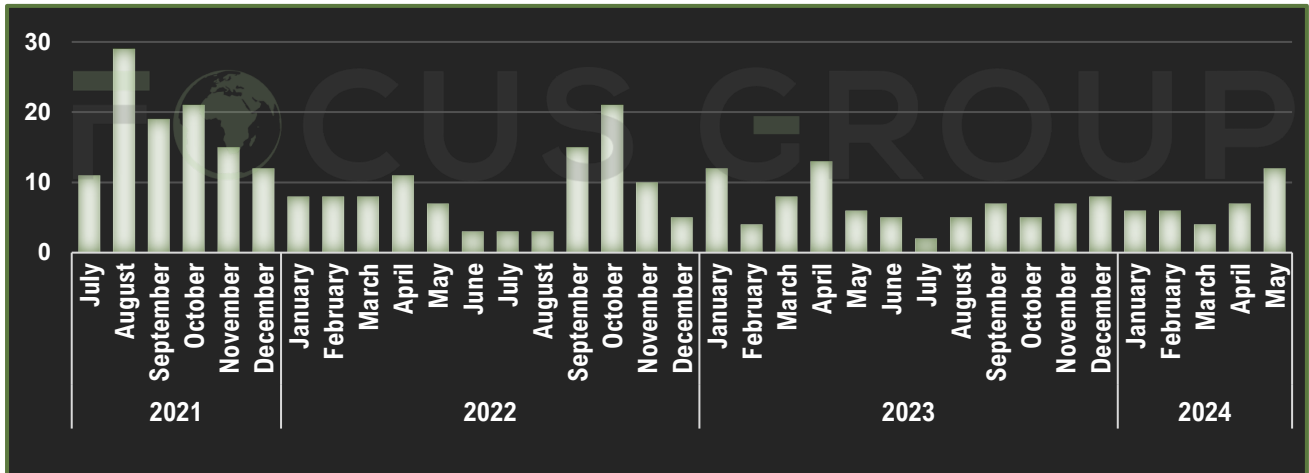
Since the insurgency started in 2017, the intensity of the conflict increased annually, spreading into the northern and southern districts of Cabo Delgado. A major checkpoint in the conflict revolves around the March 2021 large-scale attack on Palma Town, which resulted in TotalEnergies suspending its liquified natural gas (LNG) operations in the Afungi Peninsula. The large-scale attack on Palma Town served as a catalyst for the Mozambican government to open the country's doors to foreign security forces. In mid-2021, forces from Rwanda and the SADC were deployed to Northern Mozambique in a bid to bolster the local counterinsurgency effort, resulting in joint military contingents working to regain control of the conflict zone.

In addition to stabilising the security situation in and around Palma Town, the joint security forces also cleared out large parts of Mocímboa da Praia District and regained control of Mocímboa da Praia Town and its port in August 2021. In mid-2022, the security forces managed to conduct at least 32 counterinsurgency operations – including the clearing out of the Catupa Forest between June and July 2022, as well as an additional 42 security operations – consisting of the arrest of suspected insurgents or insurgent supporters, and the seizure of insurgent weapons and equipment. However, since the end of 2022, proactive counterinsurgency operations have been limited, despite the insurgency continuing to carry out attacks across the conflict zone.

In late 2022, open sources reported that insurgent leaders travelled to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) to meet with members of the Islamic State. Accordingly, the leaders emphasised that the insurgency needs to avoid indiscriminately killing civilians and rather build popular support for their movement among the local population. From early 2023, the insurgency's approach to civilians started to change significantly, with insurgent-led attacks declining – especially those targeting civilians. Insurgents began propagating their hearts and minds campaign by emphasising their aversion to harming civilians.

However, between 2023 and 2024, the outright aversion towards the harming of civilians changed somewhat. The insurgency's hearts and minds campaign remained active in areas known to house significant Muslim populations, with little to no reported civilian casualties in these areas. Yet, in areas that are not predominantly Muslim, or in communities that display a stronger alignment with security forces, civilian casualties resumed once again. While the Islamic State framed these civilian casualties as part of their campaign that, at times, involves

the targeting of “Christians”, local sources clarified that civilians are still targeted indiscriminately, though less frequently. Regardless of their actual religion, these civilians are labelled as “Christians” in Islamic State propaganda. Due to their relative aversion to civilian targets, the frequency of insurgent-led attacks significantly decreased, partly because civilian targets had constituted the majority of such attacks since 2017 (see **Figure 3**).



**Figure 3:** Frequency of insurgent-led attacks between July 2021 and May 2024.

The marked decline in insurgent aggression, especially in the first half of 2023, created a superficial perception of stability in the region, which several governments and political groupings wholly attributed to the deployment of foreign security forces. While initial announcements of the SAMIM’s drawing down of troops from the region were based on the perception that stability had been restored, subsequent information alluded to the withdrawal occurring due to financial constraints. Nevertheless, attacks on security forces steadily increased and insurgents concentrated a large portion of their efforts on the northeastern parts of Macomia District in mid-2023.

By the end of 2023, the insurgents had consolidated their control of the Catupa Forest once more and maintained control of the coast of Macomia District between the administrative posts of Mucojo and Quiterajo – despite counterinsurgency operations attempting to dislodge the insurgents from the area.

This year, the insurgents expanded their control southwards along the coast to Quissanga District while commencing another campaign in the southern districts of Cabo Delgado, ultimately crossing the Lúrio River on 25 April. As a result, a Rwandan contingent from Ancuabe District as well as the Força Local (Local Forces) from Mueda District were redeployed to Chiúre Town. While the insurgents in the south were intercepted by a joint security contingent, inclusive of the RSF, near Odepepa Village (Eráti District, Nampula Province), the activity in the south presented to be a diversion as remaining insurgent combatants in the general Mucojo-Catupa-Quiterajo area moved towards Macomia Town in the week of the 10 May large-scale incursion into Macomia Town.

The assault on Macomia Town was well-coordinated, with the insurgents being well-armed and evidently having knowledge regarding the movements of the security forces within

Macomia Town. The timing of the attack alluded to a strategic move that ensued shortly after the withdrawal of the bulk of the SAMIM forces from the town. Insurgents targeted positions of the military and the police as well as private and public infrastructure, including those belonging to NGOs. Available information pointed to four civilians and 20 security force members purportedly killed during the incident. However, the actual number of deaths has not yet been confirmed as access to the town by the security forces was restricted and the true number of casualties is not likely to be made public.

While in the town, insurgents were observed distributing looted food supplies to residents. Insurgents remained in the town for a day before withdrawing of their own accord and returning to Macomia District's coastline – which is under de facto insurgent control.

The tactics used in the Macomia Town attack closely resemble the modus operandi noted in previous large-scale<sup>1</sup> attacks in Cabo Delgado (including Quissanga in March 2020, Mocímboa da Praia in August 2020, and Palma in March 2021). Adding to the series of large-scale attacks, the latest assault reiterates the insurgency's growing capacity and capability to overrun and maintain strategic targets in the province. Some of the most notable tactics are discussed in the following sections.

### Multi-Pronged Attack

Similar to the attack on Palma Town in March 2021, insurgents initiated a multi-pronged attack against Macomia Town, attacking villages or key locations outside the town, cutting off access routes and effectively isolating the town. In addition, insurgents simultaneously attacked various military positions in and around the town. The multi-pronged approach limited the scope for any effective counterinsurgency response.

### Diversion of Security Response

A well-reported insurgent tactic is the diversion of the security forces. While the insurgents are believed to frequently use the tactic, the use of diversion tactics tends to manifest more prominently when reflecting on significant or large-scale incidents.

Prior to the attack on Macomia Town, insurgents were particularly active south of Macomia District, especially in the vicinity of the Lúrio River – threatening economic interests in the southern parts of Cabo Delgado Province, as well as posing a risk of spilling-over into Nampula Province. Affected Cabo Delgado districts included Ancuabe, Chiúre, Metuge and Quissanga, as well as Nampula Province's Eráti District. Insurgent activity pervaded southern Cabo Delgado since the start of the year (barring the Ramadan period in March-April), prompting the deployment of security forces to the districts of Chiúre and Eráti. The insurgency's ability to carry out small-scale attacks in a bid to draw the security forces' focus away from larger targets indicates a higher level of strategy and command and control.

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<sup>1</sup> Large-scale attacks are generally defined by Focus Group as attacks against district capitals/headquarters which usually include more destruction and killing than smaller hit-and-run attacks against smaller villages.

## Infiltration of Macomia Town

During the week of the attack, insurgent movements were observed in proximity to Macomia Town, ostensibly performing final reconnaissance missions. Insurgent groups moved to villages around Macomia Town, before infiltrating the town from at least four sides.

## Day and Time

A noticeable trend of several other large-scale attacks includes the initiation of attacks mid-week (on Wednesdays), in the late afternoon hours or under the cover of darkness. The Macomia Town assault started just after midnight on Friday. The timings of the attacks effectively allow the insurgents ample time to establish their offensive positions with limited risk of being spotted by the security forces or civilians, thereby enhancing the element of surprise. There is also strong information to suggest that the insurgents are aware of security force movements and operations, and therefore know the opportune time to strike.

## Disruption of Mobile and Electrical Networks

The targeting of an electricity substation outside of the town was likely aimed at disrupting telecommunications networks during the attack, as the blocking of telecommunications is a common tactic used by the insurgents during large-scale attacks.

## Increased Weapons Capability and Reinforcement

Several sources stated that the insurgents were well armed, with Human Rights Watch noting that among the attackers were “*dozens of boys carrying ammunition belts and AK-style assault rifles*”. Two SAMIM APCs were also disabled after ground-based explosives were detonated south of Macomia Town, attesting to the insurgency’s use of explosive devices to disrupt security interventions during a large-scale attack.

## Killing and Abduction of Individuals

While the systematic killing of selected individuals (usually local officials or government servants) has been noted in prior insurgent attacks, available information indicates that during the recent attack, security force members were seemingly the primary targets with civilian casualties also reported. However, approximately nine members of local humanitarian organisations were kidnapped and held for ransom. Subsequent information indicates that at least three of the captives were released, one was confirmed dead, and the rest’s status is currently unknown.

## Looting Supplies and Weapons

The looting of military bases, commercial establishments and NGOs forms a key part of the insurgent’s modus operandi and expands their arsenal, ammunition and food stockpiles. It is believed that the targeting of Macomia Town was partly aimed at looting a great deal of supplies. As a result of the looting of food supplies and medical equipment (see **Figure 4 on page 10**), as well as damage to property, both the WFP and MSF reported that they had *lost* hundreds of thousands of dollars’ worth of aid and equipment. The loss of food and medical supplies has hampered relief efforts in the Macomia District. Moreover, humanitarian organisations have warned that the insurgency might use its vehicles and branding to pose as aid workers.



**Figure 4:** Looting of medical and food supplies as well as vehicles by the insurgency.

## Occupation of Town Followed by Withdrawal

Although insurgents have been known to occupy a town for a few days following a large-scale attack, as was previously the case during the attacks on the towns of Palma, Nangade, Muidumbe, Macomia and Quissanga between 2021 and 2024, insurgents withdrew from Macomia Town just over 24 hours from initiating the assault.

Despite the government claiming that it had repelled the insurgent-led attack, the insurgents left the town of their own accord. The insurgents returned to their stronghold in the Mucojo administrative post and along Macomia District’s coastline (see **Figure 2 on page 3**).

## GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

The government confirmed the attack on Macomia Town, maintaining that the FADM promptly reacted and that the attack was “foreseeable”, with the FADM supposedly forcing the insurgents to withdraw after an initial 45-minute armed confrontation. Additionally, the government stated that during the attack, the FADM captured an insurgent (who later died of his injuries) and wounded one of the insurgent group’s leaders (who managed to escape).

Seemingly in defence of the RSF, some sources contradict the information that an RSF contingent was dispatched from Mocímboa da Praia Town and were intercepted by the insurgents between Awasse Village and Macomia Town. Instead, the sources maintain that the RSF was not called upon to provide assistance. In the aftermath of the events of 10 May, and likely due to counterintelligence efforts by the security forces in Northern Mozambique, details regarding the supposed RSF response remain unconfirmed.

Following the attack, and the subsequent withdrawal of the insurgents, reports emerged of forces from Rwanda, Botswana and South Africa reinforcing the FADM contingent based in the town. In addition, local sources stated that the security forces restricted access to the town and ordered that all residents returning to the town, after fleeing the attack, be screened. Security forces also carried out surveillance from house to house.

The insurgency has sustained its presence in the Macomia District, even enjoying de facto control along its coastline, without any effective counterinsurgency response to curb the threat in the district. Consequently, the proximity of the insurgency's control in this district has rendered the district's main town, Macomia Town, vulnerable to a large-scale attack. Moreover, the government's response to the six-year insurgency has been largely from a military perspective which has drawn criticism as socio-economic issues, which gave rise to the insurgency, have not been addressed.

Meanwhile, development initiatives such as the Northern Integrated Development Agency (Agência de Desenvolvimento Integrado do Norte – ADIN) and the Cabo Delgado Reconstruction Plan (Plano de Reconstrução de Cabo Delgado – PRCD), which were established years ago, have not addressed their objectives of socio-economic upliftment in Northern Mozambique and ensuring improved living conditions for its inhabitants.

## INTERNATIONAL REACTION

Despite the deployment of foreign security forces, which included the SAMIM and the RSF making gains and curbing the insurgency's initial momentum, the insurgency has persisted in carrying out attacks in the conflict zone. Three years after their deployment, the SAMIM was unable to maintain its presence due to insufficient resources and began its phased withdrawal at the end of December 2023 and concluded in July 2024. As a result, primary security in the region has been systematically returned to Mozambique's Defence and Security Forces (Forças de Defesa e Segurança – FDS).

In the absence of the SAMIM, Rwanda has deployed an additional 2,000 troops to Northern Mozambique and expanded its theatre of operations to also cover Macomia District, with an RSF contingent deployed to Macomia Town. Although the expanded Rwandan deployment is expected to fill the SAMIM void, and potentially improve the security situation in Macomia District, there are currently no indications of an impending counterinsurgency operation aimed at dislodging the insurgents from the coast of Macomia District.

## CONSEQUENCES

### Short to Medium-Term Outlook

The incursion into Macomia Town proved to be particularly successful for the insurgents and may have significantly boosted the supplies of insurgent camps in the Catupa Forest and along the coast of Macomia District. Given the insurgency's ability to execute a large-scale attack on Macomia Town, intercept and repel security force reinforcements, and the absence of an effective counterinsurgency response, it is likely that the insurgents will continue to carry out both large-scale and small-scale attacks on various targets for the foreseeable future.

Furthermore, considering that the attack on Macomia Town occurred after the death of the prominent insurgent military leader, Bonomade Ibn Omar, in August 2023, the loss of their military leader has not stunted the insurgency's **continued evolution and expansion of the insurgency** in Northern Mozambique. Despite the presence of foreign security forces that were once hailed for countering the insurgents, the security situation in the region, and in

Macomia District, highlights the inevitable repercussions of leaving an insurgency to fester, as has been the case along the coast of Macomia District where the insurgency has enjoyed de facto control since mid-2023.

At the current trajectory, the insurgency may be poised to establish a **pseudo-caliphate in the coastal region of Macomia District**, with little concrete evidence from the counterinsurgency effort to suggest that this course might be halted, and the insurgents effectively suppressed. Consequently, a long-term risk, akin to Nigeria's Boko Haram,<sup>2</sup> is growing increasingly probable.

## Challenging Humanitarian Crisis

Following the attack on Macomia Town, approximately *4,222 individuals were displaced* (see **Figure 5 on page 13**). The continued escalation in insurgent activity, coupled with a general lack of an effective security response, is resulting in new and returned internally displaced people (IDPs) fleeing the conflict zone, further aggravating an already dire IDP situation. **IDPs continue to face various challenges ranging from limited support to a shortage of food and funding.**

Currently, 819,004 people are displaced in IDP centres in and around Northern Mozambique with new insurgent attacks resulting in new displacements exerting pressure on an already strained food and humanitarian condition. Although efforts are being made to improve the conditions of IDPs through the government establishing more accommodation centres as well as monetary contributions from international organisations, such assistance is not sufficient to sustain the ever-growing IDP population. As a result of the government being unable to adequately support IDPs, many have opted to return to their areas of origin.

## Increased Threat Amongst the IDP Population

As far back as 2022, there have been reports of insurgents infiltrating IDP resettlement areas. In addition to insurgent combatants potentially integrating into some IDP populations, there is the added threat of insurgent supporters also being a part of IDPs. In addition to the already daunting challenge faced by the government in identifying insurgent combatants amongst the IDP population, it is even more difficult and near impossible to distinguish insurgent supporters (such as informants) amongst civilians. Consequently, there is a higher risk for insurgent supporters to infiltrate IDP populations, thereby providing insurgents with HUMINT and potentially supplies – with some reports indicating that some communities have even willingly handed over humanitarian aid to the insurgents.

Moreover, with IDPs opting to return home due to a lack of support there is a **great risk that an ever-growing and strengthening insurgency** might result in IDPs accepting insurgent rule for the sake of security and subsistence.

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<sup>2</sup> Nigeria's extremist Islamist group, Boko Haram, has plagued the region for roughly 20 years and (a breakaway part of it) joined the Islamic State to become the Islamic State West African Province.

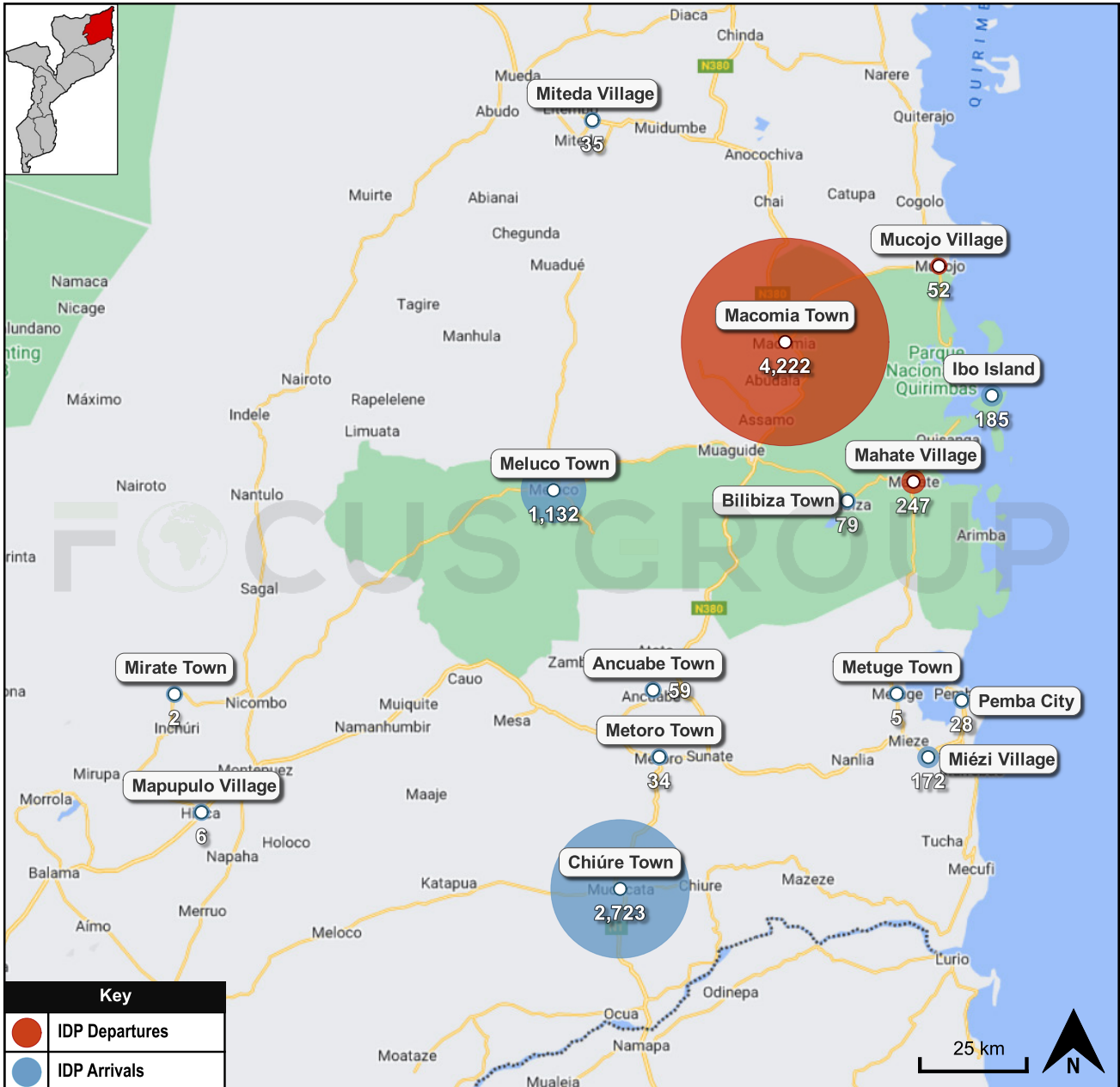


Figure 5: Number of IDPs following attack on Macomia Town.

## CONCLUSION

The counterinsurgency effort by the security forces appears to be unable to effectively contain and deal with the insurgent threat in the region. Moreover, the delay and lack of socioeconomic development continue to expose the inhabitants of Cabo Delgado to an ever-expanding and evolving insurgency. While an effective military solution, in the form of sustained counterinsurgency operations, could provide a level of stability in the short term, the longer-term solution to substantially weaken the insurgency revolves around the establishment of effective socio-economic conditions which would uplift the impoverished population and, in turn, demotivate support for the insurgency.

END