

45 years later, will there be Portuguese troops again in Cabo Delgado?

Michael Hagedorn, Público (Lisbon), 1 December 2020,

Portugal and the EU would do better to face the situation in all its complexity, rather than exclusively and unconditionally supporting the Frelimo government and its narrow military vision for the solution of the conflict in Cabo Delgado.

Last Wednesday, Defence Minister João Gomes Cravinho said that Portugal could send troops to help Mozambique fight terrorism in the north of the country. Former President Ramalho Eanes also said: "There was an easy response as long as there was strength and initiative and a mobilisation action by Europe and the United Nations, and it is very easy, with specialised forces and drones, to resolve the situation".

For a fortnight, the tone and number of voices warning of the urgent need for Portugal to support Mozambique in the fight against terrorism in Cabo Delgado has been increasing. President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, MPs from various parties and commentators are announcing this urgency more and more.

Also last week, António Costa telephoned the President of Mozambique, Filipe Nyusi, telling him that "Portugal is in solidarity and ready to support Mozambique's efforts to fight terrorism in Cabo Delgado, bilaterally and within the EU framework".

It is undeniable that barbaric attacks have increased in recent weeks, that more than 2000 people have died and that, of the eight districts affected, almost half a million people are on the run. However, the Mozambican government continues to refuse to tackle the multiple causes of this conflict, of which a considerable part is its own responsibility.

It is thus preventing, in addition to a military offensive, other important measures from being taken to address the causes of the conflict, namely to give the local population prospects of a dignified life.

If these considerations were written in Mozambique, I would be immediately in the sights of the security services.

Only last week, the Mozambican President declared during a visit to the armed forces: "We want to urge them (the FDS) to do everything possible to ascertain the truth of the facts. We want to urge you (the FDS) to do everything possible to ascertain the truth of the facts. Surveillance should come from you. You cannot be deliberately denigrated and passively watching without holding such compatriots responsible".

This means that it is dangerous to make transparent reports about what is happening in Cabo Delgado. It is therefore positive that Ana Paula Zacarias, Secretary of State for European Affairs, has once again publicly stressed that Mozambique should authorise an EU mission to Mozambique and specifically to Cabo Delgado. This would be necessary to help move forward and a key step towards more being done. This mission could have happened a long time ago, but the appropriate authorisation is still pending. Why is this so? What does the Mozambican government have to hide?

More and more studies, well-founded, have been carried out by recognised institutions - such as the one just presented by the United Nations University (UNU-Wider) - which provide a devastating attestation to the Frelimo government and show that, in all sectors, much more could have been done since independence - making it possible for Mozambique to no longer occupy one of the last places in terms of development indicators worldwide.

According to Mozambican expert Joe Hanlon in his latest newsletter: "The study confirms that a small Frelimo elite has created what is called a 'limited access' society, in which a small party group controls the state, has used it to become dominant in business and retains power through the control of institutions". Thus the suffering of the people of Cabo Delgado in the current civil war is unfortunately the most extreme expression of the lack of development in recent decades and cannot be solved by military means alone.

The inability of the Cabo Delgado provincial government has now been demonstrated during a presentation by a director of that provincial government, who not only could not present concrete measures of the provincial government to respond to the dramatic situation in Cabo Delgado, but also failed to clarify why the ADIN development organisation, created by the government half a year ago to operate in the three northern provinces of Mozambique, has not yet completed a strategic plan, nor implemented any activities. This would have put the state in a position to provide support to the thousands of refugees rather than just sending appeals to the international donor community.

In the presentation of the aforementioned UNU-Wider study, even the former Mozambican Foreign Minister, Leonardo Simão, said: "The government has learned how to manage donors and aid, but it has never learned how to develop the country".

As someone said recently in Cabo Delgado: "When they talk about the radical preacher who comes to radicalise young people, they forget that the Government has done about 80% of the work for the radical preacher. He only comes to reap the fruits".