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Preliminary Report

Mocimboa da Praia Port Attack in Mozambique

11 August 2020

Incident

On the evening of Tuesday 11 August 2020, suspected terrorists belonging to *Al Sunna Wa Jammah* (ASWJ) group stormed and seized the seaport in *Mocimboa da Praia* town, located in Mocimboa da Praia district in the northern province of Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. The clashes between the terrorists and Mozambican security forces including the navy forces known as *Fuzileiros*, began on 05 August 2020 in Mocimboa da Praia town. The number of casualties is yet to be known. This recent outbreak reportedly displaced huge number of persons from the town to neighbouring areas.

The ASWJ group is linked to the Islamic State (IS) terrorist group. In the aftermath of the incident, the IS claimed to have captured two military bases around Mocimboa da Praia and killed several soldiers.



Background

Since the beginning of insurgency in Cabo Delgado province, ASJW terrorists have curiously maintained significant interest over Mocimboa da Praia. When violence began in October 2017, terrorists attacked Mocimboa da Praia town for two consecutive days. On 20 February 2020, suspected ASWJ launched an attack against a military post killing 17 soldiers in the district. On 23 March 2020, the Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP) claimed responsibility for the attack in which ASWJ invaded and briefly occupied the town of Mocimboa da Praia. They raided military barracks, the police station and set prisoners

free. Again, on 27 June 2020, ASWJ terrorists launched a high-profile attack in Mocimboa da Praia town killing approximately 40 civilians.

Analysis

Mocimboa da Praia is a strategic port town situated near the gas plantation where multinational companies have investment projects. The port is used to deliver goods to and fro gas plantations in the neighbouring *Palma district*, located north of Mocimboa da Praia district. This particular port had appeared to be a primary target to ASWJ as they have been hovering around the town for a while. Mocimboa da Praia port is not the only port in Cabo Delgado, Pemba the provincial capital, hosts one. The terrorist might have resorted to seizing the seaport in order to frustrate economic activities from gas projects after having failed to penetrate through the security systems and directly target companies working at the plantations. For example, it is asserted that *Executive Logistics Company* and *Neptune Seguranca*, partner companies to the British *Control Risk Group*, are engaged by the US ExxonMobil Company to provide security to the company in Cabo Delgado. Furthermore, this attack against economic infrastructure, and more possible similar ones in future, could be detrimental to the country's stability whereby business operators who see their businesses threatened by such acts, might be coerced to comply with terrorists' demands in order to protect their possessions.

In the outbreak of clashes that led to the capturing of Mocimboa da Praia port, significant portion of the town was already taken over by the insurgents, but they could not reach the port that was heavily defended until the soldiers ran of ammunition on 11th of August, the day the port was seized. The *Dyck Advisory Group* (DAG), a contracted private military by the Government of Mozambique, allegedly dropped supplies of ammunition to the Fuzileiros using helicopters but the supplies were delivered far from the battleground. As a result, many soldiers were killed while trying to reach out for the ammunition. This shows some lack of coordination between the Government forces and the DAG. Last month, the Mozambican Government reportedly renewed its contract with DAG until December 2020. The contract, which is said to include training of Mozambican forces, could improve coordination between ground forces and the DAG.

It is evident that ASWJ stepped up its attacks since beginning of the year against civilian and government targets employing tactics that seem challenging to counter. The group often comes in large numbers when launching attacks and then divides into smaller groups and deploy to different areas of the target, blocking main entrances into towns to delay security forces as well as trapping-in residents. The attacks indicate that the ASJW has devised an effective recruitment strategy to attract more fighters into its ranks. Through its operatives, orchestrating well-coordinated and high-profile attacks, it is also clear that the group has grown to invest in intelligence.

In addition, the coast of Cabo Delgado is said to be a corridor for illicit trade including drug trafficking and illegal extraction of resources. The province also serves as a transit point of illicit goods to other neighbouring provinces. In December 2019, security forces intercepted two ships carrying two tons of heroin on Mozambique coast. The local

criminal syndicates supported by their international accomplices could also be the force behind the seizure of Mocimboa da Praia port, with the ultimate intention to control the trade route and subsequently allow crucial goods deliveries, such as weapons, into Cabo Delgado.

Conclusion

Terrorism in Cabo Delgado province is on the rise, the ASWJ is growing in confidence and sophistication. The group that has been engaging mostly in hit-and-run attacks is now fascinated in capturing territories and strategic infrastructure. The geographic location of the affected province might enable the propagation of the insecurity into neighbouring Tanzania and Zimbabwe. The deteriorating security situation also has the potential to draw Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF) from the region and beyond if not given the necessary attention. Cooperation is therefore very essential, not only to identify those that might travel to Mozambique to join ASWJ, but to also identify those supporting and financing its operations. Internal Coordination and intelligence sharing between the different national intelligence agencies is crucial as this terror offensive indicates a lack of coordination and ill capacity to anticipate such incidents, in particular in such a strategic port.

The humanitarian situation has worsened due to huge displacement of persons to major towns such as *Macomia* and *Pemba city*. To this effect, the Government announced its intention to build a centre where exfiltrated residents from hotspot areas will be accommodated. From the onset the Government of Mozambique has tackled the growing violence in a heavy-handed approach. Also, Private Military Contractors (PMC) largely operate without legal oversight and consequences, and this promote the risk of human rights violations during their service delivery, though they often enjoy impunity thereafter. A more comprehensive approach focusing on sustainable socio-economic development is also necessary to disrupt terrorist recruitment and radicalization. Although there is no one-size-fit-all solution when addressing issues of terrorism and violent extremism, the problem in Mozambique came at a time when already so many countries in the continent had experienced waves of terrorism and violent extremism. The country should avoid making similar mistakes and seek to implement practical solutions emphasizing on human security response approach. SADC should also actively support ongoing efforts of the Mozambican Government. Cabo Delgado, being a coastal province, it could strengthen military efforts by implementing its Maritime Strategy and also deploy its Stand-by Forces, while simultaneously supporting government's efforts in identifying and tackling root causes of the conflict.