

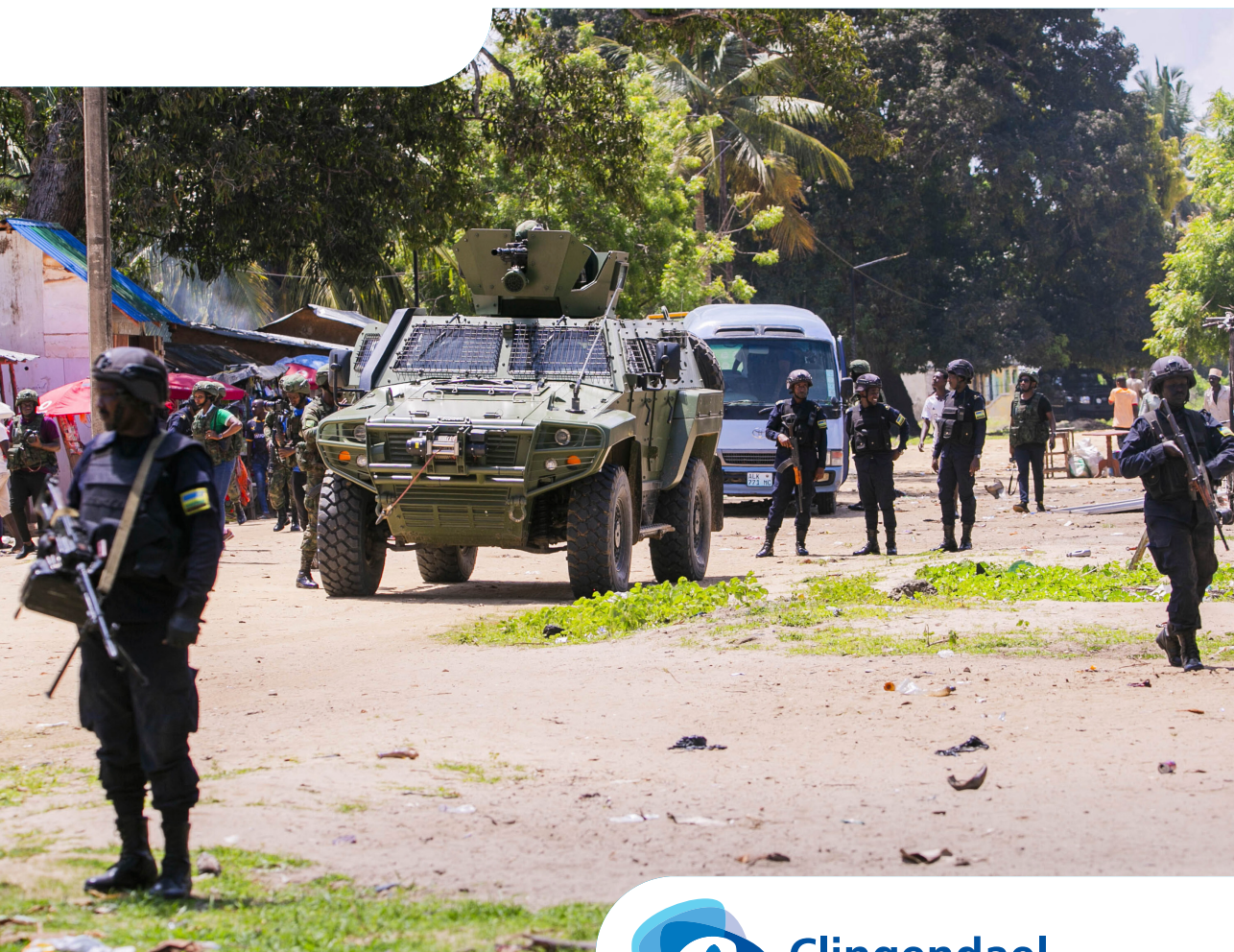
Onafhankelijk advies LNG-project Mozambique

7 november 2025

Naar aanleiding van berichtgeving over mogelijk grove mensenrechtenschendingen in de regio en vanwege de complexiteit van de veiligheidssituatie in Mozambique en, heeft het ministerie van Financiën onderzoeksbureaus Clingendael en Pangea Risk opdracht gegeven tot een onafhankelijk advies. De onderzoekers van Clingendael hebben vermeende mensenrechtenschendingen door Mozambikaanse veiligheidsdiensten in de context van het Mozambique LNG-project onderzocht. De minister van Financiën heeft de onderzoekers van Pangea Risk aanvullende vragen gesteld over de veiligheidssituatie in Mozambique. Gelet op veiligheidsoverwegingen van betrokkenen wordt van het Pangea Risk advies alleen een uitgebreide samenvatting publiek gemaakt.

Human rights violations by Mozambican security forces in Cabo Delgado in the context of the Mozambique LNG project

CRU Report



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Cover photo: Rwandan Counter-Terrorism Special Units and Mozambique police patrol streets in the town of Palma as Rwanda provided military assistance after the militant group Ansar al-Sunna seized critical locations in the region rich in natural gas and valuable metals, in Palma, Cabo Delgado Province, Mozambique on December 18, 2023. © Reuters

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This report has been produced by Clingendael's Conflict Research Unit (CRU). The CRU has an extensive track record of conducting applied, policy-oriented research and developing practical tools that assist a wide range of international stakeholders (governmental and non-governmental) in their engagement in unstable and conflict-affected settings.

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Executive summary

The aim of this report is: (i) to assess the track record of human rights violations by Mozambican security forces in the context of the protection of the Mozambique LNG project in Afungi, Cabo Delgado; (ii) to assess the overall credibility of the description of events provided by Politico's September 2024 article "*All must be beheaded*", which reported serious human rights violations against civilians by Mozambican forces in the wake of the 2021 Palma attack; and (iii) to reflect on the plausibility of future human rights incidents. The report is based on in-person interviews and conversations with over 80 local stakeholders in the Palma and Mocimboa da Praia districts, direct observations at different points in time between 2020 and March 2025, and a review of relevant secondary sources. The report covers developments up to April 2025.

The report concludes that the Mozambican Defence and Security Forces (FDS) have a troubled record of human rights violations in the region surrounding the LNG project's site in Afungi. The frequency and the intensity of human rights violations have varied significantly over time, and three main phases can be distinguished.

- In the years preceding the March 2021 attack on Palma, Mozambican forces regularly committed violations against civilians in their efforts to combat the insurgency and protect the LNG project. While some of these violations were reported by local and international organizations, many also went unreported, amidst a general climate of fear.
- Violations by the Mozambican forces peaked after the Palma attack, amidst high-intensity fighting, the logistical challenges faced by the FDS, and the collapse of law and order in the area. Many of the abuses went unreported, due to widespread communication blackouts, the absence of justice institutions on the ground, and the fear of reprisals.
- Since the deployment of Rwandan forces in mid-2021, the situation has steadily improved. Reports of serious human rights violations are much less frequent, although some limited tensions persist between Mozambican forces and the civilian population around Afungi. More serious incidents continue to be reported further away from Afungi, most notably in the Mocimboa da Praia and Macomia districts, where the insurgency is more active and where Mozambican forces operate with less involvement from their Rwandan counterparts.

While confirming the specific details of the events described by the Politico article is beyond the scope of this report, the research conducted for this report corroborates that a large number of civilians were detained and abused by FDS elements in front of the LNG project's site. This assessment is based on the accounts of four different local sources with knowledge of the events (consulted independently from the Politico investigation and from each other), corroborated by conversations with other local stakeholders with indirect knowledge of the events.

The prevention of future human rights violations hinges on securing accountability for past violations. Any efforts in this regard should consider that speaking up on these topics is extremely sensitive and risky for local communities. If all reports of abuses are to come to light, there is a need for a thorough investigation that is wide in scope, reliant on local expertise, and fully independent (from both the LNG project and the government).

1 Introduction

On 26 September 2024, the media outlet Politico published an article entitled: *'All must be beheaded': Revelation of atrocities at French energy giant's African stronghold*.¹ In the article, journalist Alex Perry accused the Mozambican security forces of committing serious human rights violations at the gates of the Mozambique LNG project site in Afungi (Cabo Delgado province, Mozambique), during their efforts to retake control of the area from the Al Shabaab violent extremist group. The article has (re)ignited debate in the Dutch Parliament over the Netherlands' involvement in the Mozambique LNG project (hereafter referred to as 'the Project') led by TotalEnergies (TE), and specifically the credit insurance policies issued by Atradius Dutch State Business (ADSB) in 2021 to companies involved in the Project. In the parliamentary discussion, the Dutch Ministry of Finance (in its capacity as a guardian authority for ADSB) has pledged to commission a report to assess the description of events provided by the Politico article. To this end, Clingendael's Conflict Research Unit (CRU) was asked to address the following questions:

- *Can you reflect on the track record of human rights violations of the Mozambican troops in the context of the LNG Project in Afungi and its surroundings, in particular those in charge of securing the project site?*
- *How do your findings relate to the allegations described by Mr. Perry in the Politico article?*
- *Contextually, we would appreciate any insights on the behavior of the Mozambican Army in the region, including the plausibility of future human rights incidents.*

1 Perry, A. 2024. 'All must be beheaded': Revelations of atrocities at French energy giant's African stronghold', POLITICO, 26 September, <https://www.politico.eu/article/totalenergies-mozambique-patrick-pouyenne-atrocities-afungi-palma-cabo-delgado-al-shabab-isis/> (accessed 27 August 2025).

To address these questions, the report first provides an analysis of the main patterns of human rights violations committed by Mozambican security actors in the context of the Project's protection,² highlighting changes over time (2017-2025) and the role played by different security actors.³ On the basis of this context, the report then assesses the description of the events provided by the Politico article based on the information gathered independently through field research. While the report manages to assess whether the general description of events provided by the Politico article is credible, the verification of specific details as in a criminal investigation is beyond the scope of this report. Similarly, assessing the article's assertions on the LNG project's responsibilities regarding the violations also lies outside of this report's scope.

The report is based on more than 80 in-person interviews and conversations with various stakeholders with direct knowledge of developments in the area, including local residents in the districts of Palma and Mocimboa da Praia,⁴ as well as members of the armed forces, government officials, members of local defence forces, personnel involved in the Mozambique LNG project, NGO staff implementing projects in Palma, researchers, and journalists.⁵ The sources were approached and consulted independently from both the Politico investigation and the LNG project, in order to ensure an independent assessment of the developments on the ground. The focus was on primary sources outside of the network of informants already available to Dutch government authorities, in order to ensure the maximum added value of the report. The report also relies on direct observations carried out in the two districts at various times over the period from 2020 to 2025, and on the analysis of secondary data from various public sources (e.g. ACLED, media outlets, NGOs, etc.). The findings of this report were discussed with Total Energies ahead of publication.

2 In line with the terms of reference agreed with the Ministry of Finance, the report does not explore the abuses committed by the insurgents, which have been extensively documented elsewhere.

3 The report does not provide a systematic overview of all incidents. Rather, it highlights the main trends, presenting evidence underpinning them.

4 Interviews were conducted with villagers from several communities south and west of Afungi (including Maganja, Monjane, Olumbi, Quitunda, Senga, Patacua, Mangala, Macala), as well as residents of Palma and Mocimboa da Praia.

5 The identity of the interviewees remains anonymous for safety reasons.

Box 1: Overview of the main security actors involved in the region and in the protection of the Project

The Mozambican forces involved in the region and in the protection of the Project's site have comprised different elements of the Mozambican Defence and Security Forces (FDS), including:

- The Mozambican Armed Defence Forces (FADM), which have provided troops (primarily from the Army), including infantry and special operations units. Their mission has focused on the land-based protection of the Afungi perimeter and patrols in the surround rural areas. In addition, the Air Force and Navy have provided limited support for aerial and maritime surveillance;
- The Mozambican Republican Police (PRM), which has played a key role in internal security operations. Specialized units such as the Rapid Intervention Unit (UIR) and the Natural Resource Protection Force (PPRNMA) have been involved in managing access and maintaining public order in the areas adjacent to the Project's site;
- The State Information and Security Service (SISE), which has been responsible for military intelligence and counter-intelligence activities, with a particular focus on preventing infiltration and acts of sabotage against the Project.

In addition to the deployment of Mozambican forces, a number of foreign security forces have been involved in operations in the region. These include:

- The Rwandan Defence Forces (RDF), which have been deployed to Cabo Delgado since July 2021 under a bilateral agreement between the Rwandan and Mozambican Presidents (whose details remain confidential). The RDF was initially deployed mostly in the Palma and Mocimboa da Praia districts, although its area of operation (as well as its size) has expanded over time;
- The Southern African Development Community (SADC) Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM), which also began deploying to the region in July 2021 to support the Mozambican government in its fight against the Al Shabaab insurgents. The force was deployed further away from the Project's site. The mission withdrew in mid-2024;
- The Tanzania People's Defence Force (TPDF), which has been engaged not only within SAMIM, but also through a bilateral deployment (since 2022) in Nangade district, with the priority of securing Tanzania's border with Mozambique.

Finally, some private security companies (PSCs) have also been involved in operations in and around Afungi, with widely different roles. These include:

- The Dick Advisory Group (DAG), a South African private security company (PSC) founded by a retired Zimbabwean colonel. Contracted by the Mozambican government, the DAG actively supported military operations against the insurgency in 2020–2021, and it has been accused of war crimes as part of its operations in the area;⁶
- ISCO Segurança, a joint venture between two PSCs associated with the ruling parties of Rwanda and Mozambique.⁷ The company was hired by the Project in 2024 to manage internal security at the Afungi site, where it provides unarmed surveillance. Previously, internal security was managed by True North, a Mozambican–South African logistics contractor with expertise in war zones.

6 Amnesty International. 2021. 'Mozambique: Civilians killed as war crimes committed by armed group, government forces, and private military contractors – new report', Amnesty International, 2 March, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/03/mozambique-civilians-killed-as-war-crimes-committed-by-armed-group-government-forces-and-private-military-contractors-new-report/> (accessed 27 August 2025).

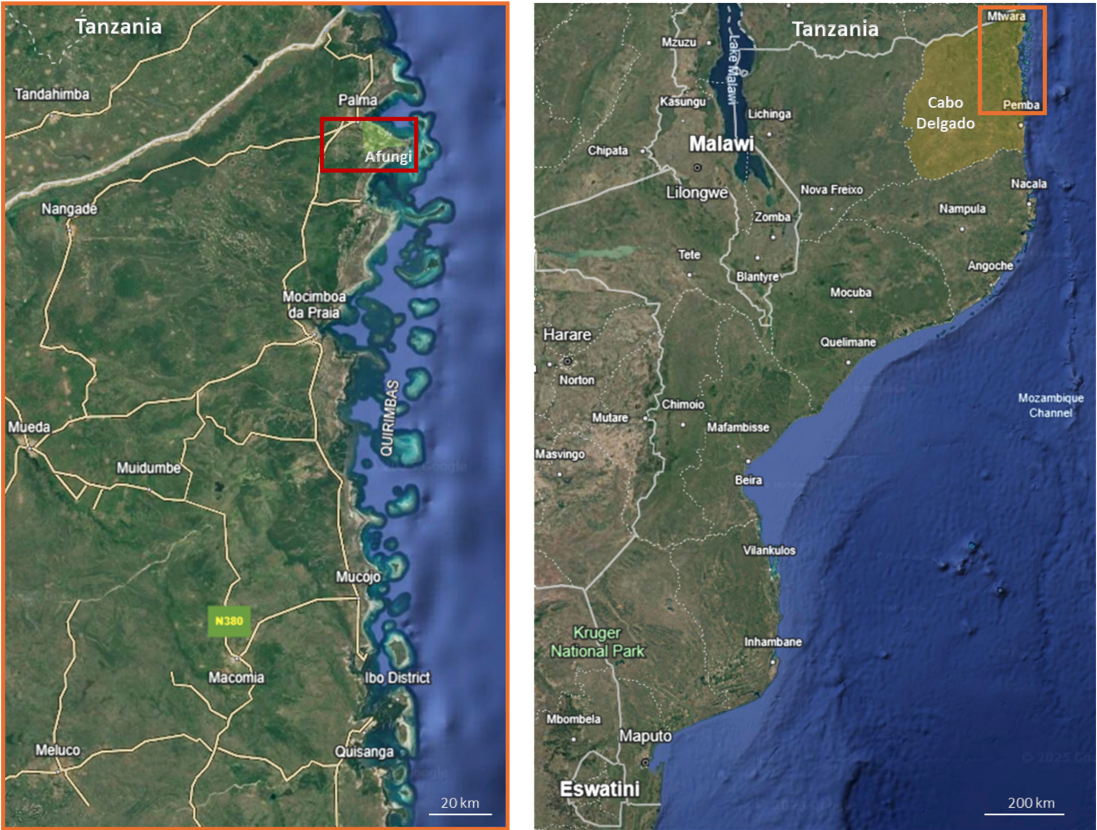
7 The two companies engaged in the joint venture are Rwanda's ISCO Global Limited (70%) and Mozambique's Osman Jacob SGPS, S.A. (30%). ISCO Global Limited is a subsidiary of Intersec Security Company, which is in turn part of Crystal Ventures, a business conglomerate associated with Rwanda's ruling party, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). On the Mozambican side, the director of Osman Jacob SGPS is M. Assif Osman, a senior member of the Frelimo party.

Figure 1 Mozambique LNG project site on the Afungi Peninsula, including village sites and troop positions⁸



8 Images from Google Earth, elaboration by the authors (multiple interviews and conversations with local stakeholders; Palma and Mocimboa da Praia districts, 2023-2025). The DUAT area (*Direito de Uso e Aproveitamento da Terra*, i.e. Right of Use and Utilisation of Land) is the area allocated to the Project. The valley on its western side is the DUAT's natural frontier, although the fence is located more to the east. This means that the Quatro Caminhos is located outside of the fence, but inside the DUAT.

Figure 2 Maps of north-eastern Cabo Delgado (left) and of Mozambique (right)⁹



9 Image from Google Earth, elaboration by the authors.

2 Context analysis: Main patterns of human rights violations by Mozambican security forces in the context of the project's protection

The frequency and intensity of the violations committed by security forces in the regions surrounding the LNG Project have varied markedly over the last few years. In broad terms, three main phases can be distinguished: (i) the period before the Palma attacks of March 2021, which witnessed a gradual escalation of the insurgency, a worsening humanitarian crisis, and significant tensions between the local population and the Mozambican security forces deployed in the region; (ii) the immediate aftermath of the Palma attack, in which the intensity of the fighting and the collapse of law and order in the area led to the most serious violations by the security forces, in a climate of general impunity; and (iii) the period following the deployment of Rwandan troops (since July 2021), during which a combination of military operations (mostly by Rwandan forces) and social initiatives (by the Project) have led to a gradual stabilization of the situation, although some tensions persist.

2.1 Before the March 2021 Palma attack: The escalation of the insurgency, a growing humanitarian crisis, and tensions between security forces and the local population

The Al Shabaab insurgency in Cabo Delgado began in October 2017 in the Mocimboa da Praia district, gradually destabilizing the region. While starting with a lower intensity, the insurgency escalated over time and reached a turning point in August 2020 when the insurgents captured the town of Mocimboa da Praia. This led to an intensification of attacks in the surrounding districts, including Palma, Nangade and Mocimboa da Praia itself. In this period, the town of Palma came under immense pressure from frequent insurgent attacks and the influx of internally displaced persons (IDPs) fleeing violence in neighbouring

areas. In addition, the town grew increasingly isolated when the key routes connecting it to the rest of the country became unusable, making the movement of people and goods in and out of Palma extremely difficult.¹⁰ This led to an increasingly severe humanitarian emergency,¹¹ including skyrocketing food prices, and the scarcity of essential goods (including fuel).¹² At this point in time, humanitarian assistance was almost non-existent, and aid mostly came from acts of solidarity among local families and national humanitarian volunteers, some of them supported by companies connected to the LNG Project.

The escalation of the insurgency also impacted the LNG Project's approach to the region. In response to the growing threat, the Project implemented a range of protective measures to enable the continuation of the construction works. At the same time, the Project's social teams, responsible for executing the resettlement of communities affected by displacement due to the Project's construction works,¹³ faced increasing difficulties, with access restrictions (due to security concerns and the prevention of Covid-19 propagation) slowing down the process. In late 2020 and early 2021, as the humanitarian crisis escalated, Total Energies (TE) began to directly distribute food kits to resettled families, while continuing the physical resettlement of families to the new village of Quitunda, and providing financial compensation to those affected economically. TE also offered logistical support to the World Food Programme (WFP) to deliver assistance to the area – though the WFP reportedly declined the contribution in order to maintain neutrality in relation to the extractive private sector.¹⁴

10 The insurgency first disrupted the main road going south towards Mocimboa da Praia, and then the road heading west through Pundanhhar. Air and sea connections remained the most effective (if not the only) routes. The Namoto border crossing provided a connection with Tanzania.

11 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. 2021. 'Mozambique – Attacks In Palma District, Flash Update No. 1 (Last updated: 29 March 2021)', ReliefWeb, 29 March, <https://reliefweb.int/report/mozambique/mozambique-attacks-palma-district-flash-update-no1-last-updated-29-mar-2021> (accessed 27 August 2025).

12 Cabo Ligado. 2020. 'Cabo Ligado Weekly: 21–27 September 2020', Cabo Ligado, 29 September, <https://www.caboligado.com/reports/cabo-ligado-weekly-21-27-september-2020> (accessed 27 August 2025). For instance, a kilogram of rice, which previously cost 70 meticaís, rose to between 350 and 400 meticaís.

13 Mozambique LNG. n.a. 'Resettlement plan', Mozambique LNG, approved by the Mozambican Government on 8 November 2016, <https://www.mozambiquelng.co.mz/sustainability/resettlement/resettlement-plan/> (accessed 27 August 2025).

14 Insights by a TE staff member, confirmed by WFP officials in Pemba. Only later in 2021 was there limited logistical collaboration.

In parallel, the Project strengthened its cooperation with the Mozambican government to ensure the protection of the site, most notably through the establishment of the Joint Task Force (JTF) in 2020. The arrangement put in place by the Project contained measures to prevent and punish human rights violations by the JTF (see box 2 below). However, despite these precautions, the deployment of Mozambican security forces around Afungi grew increasingly controversial, characterized by a very fraught relationship between soldiers and the local population. Soldiers were frequently described by local communities as poorly trained, disorganized, lacking equipment, and unfamiliar with the local context and language (many soldiers came from the predominantly Christian central and southern regions of Mozambique). For instance, according to residents, the security forces often failed to understand that local Muslim traders and fishermen had substantial cash flows, and interpreted their possession of cash as a sign of association with insurgents, leading to their targeting.¹⁵ In Palma's coastal villages (such as Maganja and Quelimane), residents recounted numerous stories of arbitrary arrests, extortion, and violent treatment by soldiers.¹⁶ Local businesspeople and workers reported being harassed, forced to show documents at gunpoint, and beaten if they refused to hand over money.¹⁷ Detention often followed resistance. Some people were reported to have been killed for violating curfews.

The Mozambican security forces also engaged in extortion, according to multiple reports by local residents. As the LNG Project proceeded with its financial compensation for households affected by the resettlement, a troubling scheme emerged.¹⁸ Multiple eyewitness accounts reported that bank employees were leaking confidential information about the compensation payments to security personnel. These individuals would then locate the recipients and extort them for a share of the money. If people resisted, they were threatened with violence, arrested, or accused of being affiliated with the insurgency. In addition, local residents blamed the security forces for undermining the transit of convoys

15 Multiple interviews and conversations with local stakeholders; Palma and Mocimboa da Praia districts, 2023-2025.

16 Ibid. A local analyst consulted for this study noted that many of the trials that have taken place since 2020 have resulted in the accused being released due to a lack of evidence, thereby corroborating the trend of arbitrary arrests.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

bringing essential supplies into Palma while the town was isolated.¹⁹ These convoys had been organized by the *Força Local* (a local militia with strong ties to the Frelimo ruling party),²⁰ and were backed by local entrepreneurs and families through voluntary contributions.²¹ However, this grassroots supply network was reportedly undercut by FDS members, who organized their own convoys, but demanded payments from communities and imposed protection taxes. With trust having been broken, local communities stopped collaborating, and the crucial supply expeditions were suspended.

Box 2: Security arrangements regulating the protection of the Project

The security arrangements to ensure the protection of the Project's site have evolved considerably over time. In 2020, a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between TE and the Mozambican government established a Joint Task Force (JTF), tasked with ensuring the security of the Afungi site and the surrounding areas. The JTF fell under the purview of the Theatre of Operations of the North (TON) of the Mozambican Defence and Security Forces (FDS). In March 2021, immediately before the Palma attack, the newly established Special Operational Theatre of Afungi (TEOA) assumed responsibility for operations in the region. The JTF was composed of approximately 700 Mozambican soldiers, commandos, and paramilitary police. While the details of the arrangement were not made public, troops were reportedly selected based on their experience and competence, and were supposed to rotate over time.²²

Under the 2020 MOU, in return for the JTF's protection, the Project provided the force with logistical support (accommodation, food,

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ The *Força Local* is a militia composed of Frelimo loyalists, the majority of whom emanate from the Makonde community. In 2023, the Mozambican government formalized the militia and started providing it with direct support (e.g. weapons, monthly allowances).

²¹ The group emerged from the engagement of local communities, particularly those associated with the Makonde ethno-linguistic group, in response to the escalating crisis in the region. Largely composed of men still in possession of weapons from Mozambique's past wars, the group took up the task of protecting their communities (e.g. through local patrols), while also helping to lead a series of successful operations to transport food and essential supplies via the dangerous Pundanhara road to Mueda.

²² However, troops deployed to Afungi were reportedly eager to continue their deployment there due to the subsidies they received (see below).

equipment), human rights training, as well as individual performance-based bonuses for its members. The bonuses were contingent upon adherence to human rights standards,²³ a mechanism intended to prevent violations and to encourage the investigation of perpetrators. Over time, however, concerns arose regarding this arrangement. According to a TE-commissioned report published in 2023,²⁴ the arrangement provided limited leverage for the Project to influence the troops' conduct, while leaving it exposed to direct links with the potential violations committed. The report thus advised the Project to sever any direct link with the Mozambican army.

In October 2023, a new agreement was signed between the Project and the government, represented by the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Mineral Resources and Energy. Although the text of the agreement has not been made public, sources suggest that the Project's companies would now provide a subsidy to the Mozambican government, rather than directly compensating members of the armed forces.²⁵ Additionally, the Mozambican forces would no longer rely on civilian logistical infrastructure provided by the companies (the government would provide the infrastructure instead), and they would be relocated away from main project camp in Afungi (where internal security is now managed by a new private security company, ISCO – see box 1). These changes are in line with the 2023 report's recommendations to reduce the exposure of the Project's companies to accusations of complicity in potential violations by the security forces.

23 The incidents that TE took notice of were passed on to be investigated and reported to the JTF Command, or escalated to the ministry level when necessary. When misconduct was confirmed, TE applied its internal disciplinary measures, which include suspending the hardship compensation of the soldiers involved and formally requesting their removal from the site. In addition, TE supported the provision of remedies to affected individuals.

24 Rufin, J.-C. and Glowacki, I. 2023. 'Report on the socio-economic, humanitarian and human rights situation in the Palma-Afungi-Mocimboa area (Cabo Delgado)', TotalEnergies, March (version updated September 2023), https://www.totalenergies.com/sites/g/files/nytnzq121/files/documents/2023-05/Mozambique_LNG_report.pdf (accessed 27 August 2025).

25 Gould, T. 2024. 'Inside the new security deal between Mozambique and gas project investors', Zitamar News, 20 May, <https://www.zitamar.com/inside-the-new-security-deal-between-mozambique-and-gas-project-investors/> (accessed 27 August 2025).

These violations took place in a general atmosphere of fear, which discouraged the reporting of the incidents. In previous years, several journalists and researchers active in the region had been detained, threatened, or silenced. Prominent incidents included: the temporary arrest of the photojournalist Estácio Valói and the researcher David Matsinhe after working in the area between Palma and Mocímboa da Praia in December 2018;²⁶ the prolonged detention of the journalist Amade Abubacar, who reported being tortured while in prison, in January 2019;²⁷ the arrest of the community radio reporter Germano Adriano in Macomia, around the same time;²⁸ the repeated detention of and aggression against the SOICO journalist Hizidine Acha, who was forced to delete images of police brutality;²⁹ and the abduction of the Palma community radio journalist Ibraimo Mbaruco, after informing colleagues that he had been surrounded by soldiers (he remains missing to this day, with the investigation into his disappearance having been closed without resolution).³⁰ Community radio stations, controlled by the government, were prohibited from broadcasting information that would damage the government's image.³¹ Consequently, violations by the security forces went largely unreported. Despite this, a number of international organizations (including the Catholic Church, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, as well as the Cabo Ligado project)

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- 26 Issufo, N. 2018. 'Autoridades desconhecem paradeiro de supostos jornalistas', DW África, 18 December, <https://www.dw.com/pt-002/mo%C3%A7ambique-autoridades-desconhecem-paradeiro-de-supostos-jornalistas/a-46794417> (accessed 27 August 2025).
- 27 Martinho, E. 2019. 'Jornalista Amade Abubacar denuncia tortura à comissão dos direitos humanos da OAM', O País, 27 January, <https://opais.co.mz/jornalista-amade-abubacar-denuncia-tortura-a-comissao-dos-direitos-humanos-da-oam/> (accessed 27 August 2025).
- 28 Human Rights Watch. 2020. 'Moçambique: Temido "desaparecimento" de jornalista', Human Rights Watch, 17 April, <https://www.hrw.org/pt/news/2020/04/17/340992> (accessed 27 August 2025).
- 29 Zitamar News. 2020. 'Palma journalist still missing as police continue harassment in Cabo Delgado', Zitamar News, 15 April, <https://www.zitamar.com/palma-journalist-still-missing-as-police-continue-harassment-in-cabo-delgado/> (accessed 27 August 2025). Catueira, A. 2024. 'Moçambique: Encerramento da investigação do desaparecimento de Ibraimo Mbaruco é um "recado perigoso"', VOA Português, 16 August, <https://www.voaportugues.com/a/mo%C3%A7ambique-encerramento-da-investigacao-do-desaparecimento-de-ibraimo-mbaruco-%C3%A9-um-recado-perigoso-/7745314.html> (accessed 27 August 2025).
- 30 Mansani, T. 2022. 'Desaparecimento de Ibraimo Mbaruco continua sem respostas', DW África, 7 April, <https://www.dw.com/pt-002/dois-anos-depois-desaparecimento-de-ibraimo-mbaruco-continua-sem-respostas/a-61383466>, (accessed 27 August 2025).
- 31 As one editor from a community radio station put it: "The community radios are government-owned, and we cannot broadcast information that damages the government's image."

did report a number of violations – including torture, arbitrary detention, and even extrajudicial killings – committed by various government forces (such as the FADM and the UIR) as part of their fight against the insurgency in the Cabo Delgado region.³² One incident that went viral on social media in September 2020 showed soldiers with FADM uniforms executing a naked woman in Awasse, accusing her of being an insurgent.³³

2.2 The aftermath of the Palma attack: The insurgency's takeover, a massive humanitarian crisis, and serious human rights violations amidst the breakdown of law and order

By the time Palma was attacked on 24 March 2021, the town was militarized, isolated, economically devastated, and caught between insurgent violence and state repression. When the insurgents entered the city, the civilian population fled in panic. The FDS launched a defensive operation, supported by the South African private security company Dick Advisory Group (DAG, see box 1), which deployed helicopters to repel the assault.³⁴ TE, operating from Afungi, organized

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- 32 Issufo, N. 2020. 'Cabo Delgado: As Forças de Defesa têm que ter mais cuidado' [audio], DW Português, 22 May, <https://www.dw.com/pt-002/cabo-delgado-as-for%C3%A7as-de-defesa-t%C3%A7am-que-ter-mais-cuidado/audio-53586402> (accessed 27 August 2025). Human Rights Watch. 2021. 'Mozambique', in *World Report 2021: Events of 2020*, Human Rights Watch, available from World Report 2021 online (2021) (accessed 27 August 2025). Amnesty International. 2021. 'Mozambique: "What I saw is death": War crimes in Mozambique's forgotten cape', Amnesty International, 2 March (Index No. AFR 41/3545/2021), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr41/3545/2021/en/> (accessed 27 August 2025). Amnesty International. 2020. 'Mozambique: Torture by security forces in gruesome videos must be investigated', Amnesty International, 9 September, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2020/09/mozambique-torture-by-security-forces-in-gruesome-videos-must-be-investigated/> (accessed 27 August 2025). Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) in collaboration with Cabo Ligado. n.a. 'Cabo Ligado Dashboard (Mozambique Conflict Monitor)', ACLED Cabo Delgado Dashboard (updated weekly), <https://acleddata.com/cabo-ligado-dashboard> (accessed 27 August 2025).
- 33 Human Rights Watch. 2020. 'Mozambique: Alleged soldiers execute woman', Human Rights Watch, 17 September, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/09/17/mozambique-alleged-soldiers-execute-woman> (accessed 27 August 2025).
- 34 In early March 2021, Amnesty International accused DAG of potential war crimes committed during military operations in 2020 across the districts of Quissanga, Macomia, and Mocimboa da Praia. According to Amnesty, "dropping unguided ordnance from moving aircraft constitutes an indiscriminate attack, as there is no way to distinguish between civilian objects and military objectives."

evacuation operations by air and sea, evacuating over 3,000 individuals by the end of March. Then, in April, the company declared a situation of *force majeure* and withdrew from the project site.

According to the interviews conducted for this report, many civilians believed that the Project's area, where the JTF was heavily armed and strategically positioned (see map 1), would be the safest place to seek refuge. Consequently, many people (estimated by local sources at between 25,000 and 30,000) converged near Quitunda resettlement village (just outside the Project's site) and in the nearby coastal community of Maganja.³⁵ The isolation of Palma, coupled with the concentration of civilians at the gates of the Project's site, exacerbated the already dire humanitarian situation. By June 2021, the situation had become catastrophic, with people (including many children) reported to be dying on a daily basis due to starvation, disease, or a lack of medical treatment.³⁶ Despite the immense logistical and security constraints, some civil society organizations – supported by multiple private sector companies (including TE and other companies partnering with the Project) – continued limited humanitarian operations (e.g. evacuations of the wounded, the sick, and children, as well as sporadic aerial deliveries of aid to be distributed by local community volunteers).

While the Mozambican forces clashed with the insurgents in neighbouring villages in the immediate aftermath of the Palma attack, civilians confined to limited and highly insecure zones began to suffer from widespread human rights violations by the security forces, unable to distinguish “villagers” from “terrorists”. Reports emerged of civilians being extorted by FDS members in order to access the evacuation flights operating from Afungi's airstrip.³⁷ Additional reports included incidents of sexual violence, physical assaults, executions, and arbitrary restrictions (for instance, people were prevented from accessing the sea or their farmland in order to support themselves, or even from going to nearby bush

35 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. 2021. 'Nearly 30,000 people displaced by March attacks in northern Mozambique', UNHCR Briefing Note, 30 April, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing-notes/nearly-30000-people-displaced-march-attacks-northern-mozambique> (accessed 27 August 2025).

36 Multiple interviews and conversations with local stakeholders; Palma and Mocimboa da Praia districts, 2023-2025.

37 British Broadcasting Corporation. 2021. 'Mozambique Palma attack: "I had to pay a bribe to flee"', BBC News, May 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-57254543> (accessed 27 August 2025).

areas to gather firewood or to forage for food).³⁸ The situation worsened with the passing of time. With TE's withdrawal and the termination of the DAG's contract in April, Mozambican forces took full control of security in the area. However, they soon began to face serious logistical challenges, including shortages of food, weapons, and basic supplies. Amidst widespread communication blackouts, the mass displacement of civilians, and the near-total absence of law enforcement and judicial oversight, civilians were left vulnerable to a wide range of serious violations.

Military personnel were reported to be actively involved in looting. Media reports confirmed soldiers' participation in the looting of commercial banks in Palma.³⁹ Eyewitnesses also observed FADM members stealing from hotels, private homes, and private companies' offices.⁴⁰ According to local residents, the looted items were often resold in other areas of northern Mozambique.⁴¹ According to local rumours, some soldiers boasted of comrades who built houses in Maputo with looted goods.⁴² Residents claim that people with connections to the military returned to the district capital to protect their property by paying bribes to the soldiers. In doing so, they witnessed civilians looting shops in collusion with military personnel, often also paying bribes for access.⁴³ Residents also complained about the military's role in the local economy, particularly the fuel trade and food distribution, accusing them of selling looted rice and flour at inflated prices.⁴⁴ Locals also reported having to pay 500 meticaïs to travel from Quitunda to Maganja to fish, and that their fish and agricultural products

38 United Nations Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict. 2021. 'Mozambique: UN officials alarmed at escalating violence against civilians, including women and children, call to increase protection & assistance', United Nations, 31 March, <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/press-release/35675/> (accessed 27 August 2025). Interviews with IDPs in Quitunda.

39 Carta de Moçambique. 2021. 'Palma à saque: militares do Exército "varrem" tudo, incluindo bancos (BCI e Standard Bank)', CartaMZ, 2 June, <https://cartamz.com/politica/10778/8042-palma-a-saque-militares-do-exercito-varrem-tudo-incluindo-bancos-bci-e-standard-bank/> (accessed 27 August 2025).

40 Carta de Moçambique, 2021, Palma à saque, op. cit.

41 Elements of the Força Local confirm that soldiers would transport household items.

42 Multiple interviews and conversations with local stakeholders; Palma and Mocimboa da Praia districts, as well as Maputo, 2023-2025.

43 One international news report showed a journalist interviewing Palma's Governor on the main road while looting continued around them.

44 One kg of sugar reached 500 meticaïs (normally 100), and rice climbed to 400 meticaïs (usually under 80).

were often seized, leading a local community leader to complain that “the military didn’t buy, they took.”⁴⁵ In Monjane, residents alleged that the military targeted homes thought to contain compensation money from resettlements.⁴⁶ Humanitarian partners distributing food and essential goods were also extorted for money in exchange for continued protection while the security forces escorted them through dangerous areas. One of them reported a member of the security forces saying: “We can kill you right here and take the goods. Then we’ll say it was the Al-Shabaab”.⁴⁷

Local sources also accuse soldiers of engaging in assaults, sexual violence, and killings.⁴⁸ Stop-and-search operations were reported to be frequent, with soldiers demanding identification despite the fact that large segments of the population lack identification documents.⁴⁹ Those without documents were forced to pay bribes. According to residents, being Muslim or born in Mocimboa da Praia raised suspicions, often resulting in harsh interrogations and demands for money.⁵⁰ Refusal led to beatings. South of Afungi, particularly in Quitunda, civilians who sought safety there reported facing strict limitations on movement and circulation.⁵¹ For instance, villagers who returned after dark due to their working schedules risked being labelled as an insurgent. While Muslims were particularly harshly targeted by the government forces’ anti-insurgency campaign,⁵² local sources reported that also Christians and relatives of community leaders could be detained or executed based on suspicions. Villagers reported discovering bodies in surrounding farmland, widely believed by the local population to be victims of FADM violence. In Senga alone, for instance, residents identified and named 13 people missing after military encounters.⁵³ Eyewitnesses also

45 Interview with a community leader, 2025.

46 Interview with a resident in Monjane, 2023.

47 Interview with a humanitarian actor, Palma, 2025.

48 Multiple interviews and conversations with local stakeholders; Palma and Mocimboa da Praia districts, 2023-2025.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

52 Many soldiers come from the centre and the south of the country and are Christians, while Muslims are more reluctant to join the army. Soldiers typically receive poor training and have no knowledge of the context in which they are deployed. In the fight against Al Shabaab’s Islamic insurgency, Muslims typically become easy targets for suspicion. Multiple interviews and conversations with members of the armed forces and residents; Palma and Mocimboa da Praia districts, 2023-2025.

53 Multiple interviews and conversations with residents in Senga, 2023-2025.

reported cases of sexual violence. In Patacuá, locals described drunk soldiers entering homes without permission and raping women.⁵⁴ A random survey of 60 households in Monjane found that 57% and 34% of these households had at least one member who had been “killed” or “disappeared” respectively.⁵⁵ Respondents blamed both insurgents and the excessive use of force by the FDS in the months following the Palma attack.

During this period, in which violations were at their highest, civilians had no state structures to turn to in order to file complaints or advocate for detained family members. Following the March 2021 attack, the district prosecutor’s office and the court in Palma ceased functioning. The administration and public servants had been evacuated. The only way in which the state was present was through the FDS themselves. Residents of Maganja, Monjane, Senga, Patacuá, and Quitunda consistently stated that trying to make a claim would also expose them to the risk of being detained.⁵⁶ One man in Senga who tried to help his brother was reportedly dragged to a field and beaten by soldiers. The sporadic presence of the local administrator or police chief did not provide a trusted or reliable avenue for pressing complaints, as they were widely perceived as being complicit with the military command.⁵⁷ Only people with personal ties to soldiers or humanitarian volunteers had any chance of making a claim.

Several cases of human rights violations were reported to the Afungi Special Operations Theatre (TEOA) through the human rights officer within TE’s security department, who was expected by residents to engage with TEOA to facilitate action.⁵⁸ In practice, however, the responsibility for investigating incidents, identifying the perpetrators, and approaching the victims or their family reportedly fell on the Mozambican Republican Police (PRM) and the TEOA.⁵⁹ In instances where an offence was acknowledged, the standard form of reparation was the provision of a bag of rice and cooking oil to the victim or

54 Multiple interviews and conversations with residents in Patacuá, 2023-2025.

55 Feijó, J., Maquenzi, J. and Balane, N. 2023. ‘Organizações humanitárias a Sul e TotalEnergies a Nordeste: opções dos deslocados internos num contexto de Estado frágil’, Destaque Rural No. 242, Observatório do Meio Rural, 14 June, <https://omrmz.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/DR-242.pdf> (accessed 27 August 2025).

56 Multiple interviews and conversations with local stakeholders; Palma and Mocimboa da Praia districts, 2023-2025.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid.

their family, and in some cases an apology by the perpetrator or the commander. TE would also suspend the supplementary salary payments allocated to the entire contingent of the specific outpost. Some individuals who had the courage to denounce human rights violations reported receiving veiled threats.⁶⁰ Even when TE commissioned a “report on the socio-economic, humanitarian and human rights situation in the Palma-Afungi-Mocímboa area” (also known as the “Rufin Report”),⁶¹ some of the abuses remained unreported. For instance, a researcher consulted for this study said that he had told the report’s author of accounts that he had heard about alleged abuses by the FDS in Monjane, but these were not mentioned in the report, because according to the author this did not fall under the terms of reference.⁶²

2.3 The arrival of Rwandan troops: An effective counter-insurgency, the return to civilian life, and the improvement of civilian-military relations

Rwandan troops began deploying to Cabo Delgado province in July 2021, at the request of the Mozambican government. The troops were tasked with ensuring security in areas around the LNG Project’s site in Afungi, as well as the two most important logistic corridors (Palma - Mocímboa da Praia and Mocímboa da Praia - Awasse - Mueda). These objectives were achieved within just a few months by the Rwandan troops, who managed to gain the trust of the population and establish a reliable local intelligence network. This was partly because many of the Rwandan soldiers speak Swahili, a language with significant similarities to the local Kimwani language, and above all because they demonstrated exemplary behaviour in their interactions with civilians – in stark contrast to the conduct of the Mozambican troops. According to ACLED data collected in Cabo Delgado, over 13% of FADM’s total engagement in political violence in 2018-23

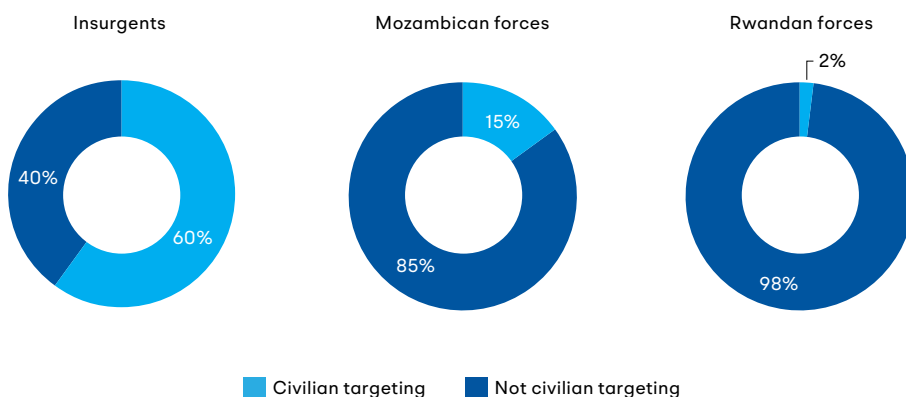
60 Ibid. The climate of intimidation described in the previous section, exacerbated by the high-intensity fighting and the lack of any presence by state institutions other than the FDS, made reporting even more challenging than before.

61 Rufin and Glowacki, 2023, Report on the socio-economic, humanitarian & human rights situation in Palma-Afungi-Mocímboa, op. cit.

62 Interview with a researcher, 2025.

has consisted of violence against civilians, with peaks of 20% in 2020-21.⁶³ In contrast, ACLED recorded only two civilian targeting events by Rwandan forces in their three and a half years of deployment (see figure 3).⁶⁴

Figure 3 Violence against civilians by actor, 2018-24, Cabo Delgado (ACLED data)⁶⁵



Interviews with local stakeholders strongly corroborate the picture portrayed by the data. For instance, while the FDS had regularly engaged in the extortion and demanded bribes from civilians trying to access the sea or their farms (see above), the Rwandan troops did not extort or charge locals, but purchased local products in a friendly and respectful manner.⁶⁶ Moreover, following the

⁶³ Cabo Ligado. 2024. 'Actor Profile: Defense Armed Forces of Mozambique (FADM)', Cabo Ligado / ACLED, 31 January, <https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Cabo-Ligado-Actor-Profile-FADM-1.pdf> (accessed 27 August 2025), p. 5/. Bofin, P. 2025. 'Rwanda in Mozambique: Limits to civilian protection', ACLED / Cabo Ligado, 23 April, <https://acleddata.com/2025/04/23/rwanda-in-mozambique-limits-to-civilian-protection/> (accessed 27 August 2025). This means that, in 2020-21, one out of five violence events involving FADM targeted mainly (if not only) civilians. These incidents included retaliatory actions against communities, the unlawful detention of civilians, and criminal behaviour by the security forces.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Data from ACLED (<https://acleddata.com/explorer/>). Data downloaded on 28 May 2025. Metric: Event counts. Event categories: Political violence. Years: 2018-2024. Region: Cabo Delgado. Actors: Insurgents ("Islamic State Central Africa Province" and "Islamic State Mozambique"); Mozambican forces ("Military forces of Mozambique"); Rwandan forces ("Military forces of Rwanda"). Elaboration by the authors.

⁶⁶ Multiple interviews and conversations with local stakeholders; Palma and Mocimboa da Praia districts, 2023-2025.

return of order to Palma town after August 2021, when cases of sexual violence against women began to be reported, community leaders reported turning to the Rwandan command to file complaints.⁶⁷ Rwandan forces responded quickly by investigating and identifying the perpetrators (who, according to community members, were Mozambican troops). The violations soon stopped, although the exact methods used by the Rwandan troops were unclear. The Rwandan soldiers even provided essential and high-quality medical care to the local communities. The efforts of the Rwandan troops were boosted by those of the Project, which supported small businesses, purchased local goods from residents, and employed hundreds of people in labour-intensive projects (such as grass cutting and site cleaning), thus managing to stimulate the local economy.⁶⁸ These actions reduced the likelihood of local communities collaborating with insurgents.

As a result, since 2022 the security situation in northern Mozambique has improved significantly. Increased security in both Palma district and Mocimboa da Praia town has led people to return to their areas of origin (by late 2023, UNHCR reported 420,000 returns)⁶⁹ – although it should be noted that returning communities have found destroyed infrastructure and extremely limited access to public services (e.g. healthcare, education), and many people still remain displaced.⁷⁰ The improvement in the security situation has also resulted in decreased military pressure on the population – at least compared to the situation in 2020 and 2021. Around Afungi, relations between the Mozambican troops and the local population seem to have improved, particularly after the arrival of the Rwandan troops. Over the past two years, reports of disappearances or killings of civilians by elements of the FDS have become rare or non-existent.⁷¹

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid.

69 Hughes, J. 2023. 'UNHCR notes return of internally displaced people', AIM News, 29 August, <https://aimnews.org/2023/08/29/unhcr-notes-return-of-internally-displaced-people/> (accessed 27 August 2025).

70 Feijó, Maquenzi and Balane, 2023, *Organizações humanitárias a Sul e TotalEnergies a Nordeste*, op. cit. Feijó, J. 2024. 'Fragilização do Estado, desgaste do tecido social e ausência de perspectivas para a resolução do conflito', Destaque Rural No. 268, Observatório do Meio Rural, April, https://omrmz.org/destaque_rural/dr-268-fragilizacao-do-estado-desgaste-do-tecido-social-e-ausencia-de-perspectivas-para-a-resolucao-do-conflito-english-version-available/ (accessed 27 August 2025).

71 Multiple interviews and conversations with local stakeholders; Palma and Mocimboa da Praia districts, 2023-2025.

Efforts are also ongoing to rebuild the justice institutions which had been completely destroyed during the peak of the insurgency in 2021. In 2022, TE signed an MOU with the Ministry of Justice to provide logistical support for the increased presence of prosecutors, judges, and SERNIC (National Criminal Investigation Service) officials in Palma district. The company provided a set of containers to house the operations of various justice institutions. However, the Palma courthouse is still not operational, and the judge and the prosecutor remain absent from the district due to a lack of proper living and working conditions. Since August 2023, only one trial has reportedly taken place in Palma, made possible solely through logistical support from TE.⁷² Trials have to take place in Pemba or Mueda, but the lack of funds for transportation means that detainees are held in police station cells for months while awaiting trial, and have to be fed by their families due to a lack of funds for food. The Public Prosecutor's Office, IPAJ (Institute of Legal Assistance and Representation), and SERNIC all lack proper working conditions: they do not have vehicles, fuel, legal documentation, computers, or printers.⁷³

Despite the overall improvement in the security situation and in civilian-military relations, a few points of tension remain. One point of concern relates to incidents involving fishermen, whose livelihoods are heavily affected by the restrictions imposed by the Project on ship traffic north of the Afungi Peninsula.⁷⁴ These fishermen are now forced to fish in other areas (particularly Quiwia or areas south of Afungi), where the convergence of many fishermen is depleting fish stocks. Fishermen claim that they are not being compensated, and they resort to clandestine fishing as a means of economic survival.⁷⁵ This, however, has led to tensions and conflicts with the FDS patrolling the maritime area – not least due to the fact that the areas where fishing is prohibited are not always clearly defined, making it difficult for fishermen to comply. According to the fishermen, FDS attitudes vary – sometimes they are more lenient, at other times

72 Feijó, J. 2024. 'Precariousness of public services, social discontent and risk of spreading insurgency in northeastern Cabo Delgado', Destaque Rural No. 285, Observatório do Meio Rural, 8 August, English version, <https://omrmz.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/DR-285-English.pdf> (accessed 27 August 2025).

73 Ibid.

74 The restrictions particularly affect fishermen from Palma town, the fishing population that has been resettled from Afungi, as well as communities from Maganja, Senga, and Patacua.

75 Multiple interviews and conversations with local stakeholders; Palma and Mocimboa da Praia districts, 2023-2025.

they are more intolerant (as one of them put it: “if we’re lucky, we’re just told to leave”).⁷⁶ Several complains of aggression by the FDS have been reported in recent years around Afungi, involving fishermen being beaten or held at gunpoint.⁷⁷ In some cases, fishermen had their catch stolen. Still, fishermen agree that the situation has improved in recent years. Starting in 2024, navy patrols began including members of local communities, who can help to identify people and reduce the suspicion of civilians. However, some community members state that the military have demonstrated a growing reluctance to be accompanied by civilians (according to locals, because they want to maintain opportunities for extortion).⁷⁸ In Palma Sede, fishermen say that they reported the violations they suffered to the TE committee, but they complain that the process is lengthy and slow, and that they have not been compensated for the damage that they have endured.⁷⁹

Besides the issues with fishermen, civilians continue to complain about the highly corrupt behaviour of the traffic police along major roads.⁸⁰ They say that police officers demand to see documents (e.g. drivers’ licences, insurance certificates, or vehicle inspection records) that are virtually impossible to obtain in the northeastern part of the province. Tensions also persist between civilians and members of the FDS, who carry out mobility checks and sometimes demand goods being transported. Nearly all local transporters and economic actors report being victims of monetary extortion by the authorities (as in many areas of Mozambique).⁸¹ The population has access to a hotline to communicate with the Project in Afungi, but many locals are hesitant to use it.⁸² Some fear retaliation, being concerned that calls can be traced back to their phone numbers. Others report that they have submitted complaints but say that the process is too slow or that their issues have never been resolved.

76 Interview with a fisherman, Cabo Delgado, 2025.

77 Two incidents occurred between Palma and Afungi, in an area locally known as Mitalala, where fishermen reported being brutally beaten by FDS members. Another incident took place in Ngoje, near Afungi, when three soldiers threatened to kill a fisherman, before releasing him.

78 Multiple interviews and conversations with local stakeholders; Palma and Mocimboa da Praia districts, 2023-2025.

79 Ibid.

80 Multiple interviews and conversations with local stakeholders; Palma and Mocimboa da Praia districts, 2023-2025.

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid.

While the security situation has improved in the area around Afungi, the most serious and frequent incidents between the Mozambican security forces and the civilian population have increasingly been reported further south – particularly in the districts of Mocimboa da Praia and Macomia, where the insurgents are currently most active.⁸³ For instance, in June 2023, three residents of Mocimboa da Praia were killed by officers from the Rapid Intervention Unit.⁸⁴ In January 2024, three civilians were killed by FADM soldiers in Mucojo, under suspicion of being insurgents.⁸⁵ In July, the killing of a merchant in Macomia by FDS members led to clashes between civilians and the police.⁸⁶ The following month, an airstrike along the Macomia coast resulted in civilian casualties and injuries.⁸⁷ The violations are reported to be more frequent in areas where Mozambican troops operate without their Rwandan counterparts.⁸⁸

This trend suggests that, despite the improvement in the situation in and around Afungi thanks to the deployment of Rwandan troops, the Mozambican forces remain ill-equipped to deal with the insurgency, and their relations with the local civilian population remain complicated. A researcher interviewed for this study quoted a Frelimo first secretary from a village – speaking on condition of

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- 83 Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). 2023. 'Actor Profile: Islamic State Mozambique (ISM)', ACLED / Cabo Ligado, 30 October, <https://acleddata.com/2023/10/30/actor-profile-islamic-state-mozambique-ism/> (accessed 27 August 2025).
- 84 Integrity Magazine. 2023. 'Agentes da UIR acusados de matar três civis em Mocimboa da Praia', Integrity Magazine, 12 June, <https://integritymagazine.co.mz/arquivos/12656> (accessed 27 August 2025).
- 85 Bowker, T. 2024. 'Insurgents seize key Cabo Delgado village from Mozambique military', Zitamar News, 25 January, <https://www.zitamar.com/insurgents-seize-key-cabo-delgado-village-from-mozambique-military/> (accessed 27 August 2025).
- 86 Lisboa, O. 2024. 'Moçambique: Três mortos nos confrontos entre polícia e populares', RFI África-Lusófona, 10 July, <https://www.rfi.fr/pt/áfrica-lusófona/20240710-moçambique-três-mortos-em-confrontos-entre-polícia-e-populares/> (accessed 27 August 2025).
- 87 Carta de Moçambique. 2024. 'Terrorismo em Cabo Delgado: Mucojo sob forte bombardeamento', Cartamz, 17 August, <https://cartamz.com/politica/1458/terrorismo-em-cabo-delgado-mucojo-sob-forte-bombardeamento/> (accessed 27 August 2025).
- 88 Centro Para Democracia e Direitos Humanos. 2023. *Northern Operational Theatre without food while the Rwandan Army buys food – and minds – in Cabo Delgado*, 11 November, <https://cddmoz.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Northern-Operational-Theatre-without-food-while-the-Rwandan-Army-buys-food-%E2%80%93-and-minds-%E2%80%93-in-Cabo-Delgado.pdf> (accessed 27 August 2025). Feijó, J. 2023. 'Calls for denunciation and vigilance in a context of fragile state: reconstruction of public institutions and survival strategies of returned populations', Destaque Rural No. 260, Observatório do Meio Rural, 13 December, <https://omrmz.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/DR260-ENG.pdf> (accessed 27 August 2025).

anonymity – who stated: “*When the Rwandans leave, our soldiers will have to leave first. We want to be left only with Anadarko*” (referring to the company from which TE acquired its stake in the Project). Recent reports also suggest that the Rwandan troops are currently adopting a less proactive posture, resulting in the increased exposure of civilians to insurgent attacks, for instance on the highway connecting Macomia district and Mocímboa da Praia.⁸⁹

89 Bofin, 2025, Rwanda in Mozambique: Limits to civilian protection, op. cit.

3 Focused analysis: Assessment of the information reported by Politico

While confirming the specific details of the events described by the Politico article is beyond the scope of this report, the research conducted for this report corroborates that a large number of civilians were detained and abused by FDS elements in front of the LNG project's site. This assessment is based on the accounts of four different local sources with knowledge of the events (consulted independently from the Politico investigation and from each other), corroborated by conversations with other local stakeholders with indirect knowledge of the events.⁹⁰ The intensity of the violations and the challenges faced by local residents in reporting them fit with the broader pattern of developments taking place in the aftermath of the Palma attack, characterized by the near-complete breakdown of law and order in the area (see the previous section).

According to testimonies from the sources consulted for this research, amidst high-intensity fighting in the area around Afungi in June 2021, villagers fled to nearby farmlands. Civilians were told by the FDS to gather at the Patacua barracks to avoid being mistaken for insurgents. Hundreds complied, but upon arrival they were separated by gender, searched, and had their money, phones, and valuables confiscated. Those with scars, burns, or marks suggesting the carrying of weapons or exposure to explosives were beaten and loaded into military vehicles. A survivor testified that they were taken to the Afungi crossroads, locally known as *Quatro Caminhos* ("Four Ways"). Two shipping containers held approximately 180 people, a large number of them from Monjane and Patacua. Most were men, although there were also elderly men and a pregnant woman, who gave birth in front of the containers. Initially, detainees

⁹⁰ The sources include one survivor, a person knowing one of the detained people, and two eyewitnesses, whose accounts converge with each other. The accounts were corroborated by conversations with other local stakeholders with indirect knowledge of the events.

were locked inside without food or water. According to a survivor, after several days, a large group of young men were taken to Ngogi. Others were removed in smaller groups, never to return. The survivor believes that they were interrogated and executed.

According to the testimonies gathered, for three months detainees endured physical abuse. Blindfolded and beaten outside the containers, they were interrogated in Portuguese, a language many did not understand. In late July, a white man approached the containers and asked soldiers who the detainees were. After he was told that they were displaced civilians under protection, the detainees began receiving daily meals from Afungi – usually maize porridge, beans, rice, and mackerel. When Rwandan troops started circulating more intensively in this area, the Mozambican military reportedly ordered the prisoners to hide. According to the survivor, of the original 180, only 26 survived. In October, they were transferred to Simo, where they spent three more months cleaning, cooking, and performing forced labour for soldiers. In the end, they were allowed to play football. Upon their release, a survivor said that a soldier told them: *“Those who died, died – it was war. If anyone asks, say the others were in different containers and are still coming.”*

As noted earlier, these violations took place at the height of the crisis in the region – in the months following the March 2021 Palma attack, when intense fighting, the FDS’s logistical struggles, and the near-total collapse of law enforcement led to widespread violations. Communication blackouts, the lack of access for external actors, and the breakdown of the justice system meant that the violations went largely underreported, and the fear of retaliation prevented people from speaking out. Ongoing attempts to restore access to justice in the region (see above) beg the question of whether and how past violations will be investigated. Providing accountability for past human rights violations is widely recognized as a key factor in ensuring the prevention of future violations.⁹¹

In terms of ongoing investigations by Mozambican authorities, staff from SERNIC and the Mozambiquan Institute for Legal Assistance and Representation (IPAJ) have stated that they have not received any complaints regarding human rights

91 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). n.a. ‘Preventing human rights violations’, OHCHR Prevention & Early Warning, n.a., <https://www.ohchr.org/en/prevention-and-early-warning/preventing-human-rights-violations> (accessed 27 August 2025).

violations committed in Afungi by members of the FDS. The SERNIC delegate claimed that such allegations are being spread by opportunistic foreign individuals. However, in March 2025 the Mozambican authorities eventually acknowledged the reports of alleged violations taking place in the areas surrounding Afungi's site.⁹² A criminal case was opened, and according to the Attorney General an investigation is ongoing. The prosecutor added that the case was formally registered in early February and had been under investigation for approximately 30 days. Nevertheless, representatives of different justice and local administration institutions confirmed that no representative of the Public Prosecutor's Office was present in the district at that time.⁹³

In parallel, the Project has conducted its own investigation on the abuses, and reports to have found no evidence of the events described by the Politico article. In a press statement published in November 2024, the Project referenced a series of internal and third-party investigations into the allegations made by the Politico article, including forensic reviews of digital devices, logs of communications with local communities and grievances cases, operational reports, two surveys, a 2022 human rights due diligence report, and its engagement with Mozambican authorities and the country's Human Rights National Committee (HRNC).⁹⁴ However, some of the sources consulted for this study reported that many Mozambican (non-governmental) stakeholders are critical of the Project's response.⁹⁵ For instance, they stress that the scope of the two surveys quoted in the response did not include a focused investigation of human rights violations, and that the results of the 2022 report and the HRNC investigation have not been made public.

More broadly, it is important to note that the barriers preventing people from speaking out on the abuses are very high, given the context of widespread

92 Carta de Moçambique. 2025. 'Em Afungi: PGR investiga alegados crimes cometidos pelas Forças de Defesa e Segurança', CartaMZ, 4 March, <https://cartamz.com/sociedade/41208/em-afungi-pgr-investiga-alegados-crimes-cometidos-pelas-forcas-de-defesa-e-seguranca/> (accessed 27 August 2025).

93 Interviews and conversations with Palma District Administration Office, IPAJ and SERNIC officials.

94 Mozambique LNG. 2024. 'Investigations performed by Mozambique LNG on the allegations published by Politico on 26th September 2024', 26 November, <https://www.mozambiquelng.co.mz/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Press-Release-Investigations-performed-by-Mozambique-LNG-on-the-allegations-published-by-Politico.pdf.pdf>.

95 Multiple interviews and conversations with local stakeholders; Palma and Mocimboa da Praia districts, as well as Maputo, 2023-2025.

intimidation and repression (see above). Hence, people may be reluctant to share the more critical accounts with investigators, particularly if the investigators lack a relation of trust with the local communities (or the time to build it), or if they are seen as being linked to the Mozambican authorities and/or the Project. Therefore, a thorough overview of human rights violations that have occurred is unlikely to be established without an independent investigation by a team of national and international specialists, with in-depth knowledge of the dynamics in Afungi, an extensive field presence, meaningful engagement with local communities, sufficiently broad terms of reference (including all kinds of human rights violations committed in the area since at least 2021) and a public output (independent of any approval by the Project or the Mozambican authorities).

4 Conclusion

The research conducted for this report shows that the Mozambican Defence and Security Forces have a troubled record of human rights violations in the region surrounding the Project's site in Afungi. The frequency and the intensity of the violations committed have varied significantly over time. In the years preceding the March 2021 attack on Palma, Mozambican forces committed several violations against civilians in their efforts to combat the insurgency and protect the Project. While some of these were reported by local and international organizations, many also went unreported, due to a general climate of fear. Violations by the Mozambican forces peaked after the Palma attack, amidst high-intensity fighting, the logistical challenges faced by the FDS, and the collapse of law and order in the area.

It was in this context that, according to the Politico investigation, FDS elements committed serious human rights violations against civilians in front of the Project's site. While confirming the specific details of the events was beyond the scope of this report, four independent interviews conducted with local sources with knowledge of the events corroborated that a large number of civilians were detained in containers in front of the Project's site and abused by the Mozambican security forces. The fear of reprisals – this time compounded by communication challenges – made reporting even more scarce than in the earlier phases.

Since the deployment of Rwandan forces in mid-2021, the situation has steadily improved. Reports of serious human rights violations are much less frequent. Some more limited tensions between Mozambican forces and the civilian population persist around Afungi, particularly due to the restrictions faced by fishermen, and the corrupt behaviour of police forces along land routes. Other more serious incidents continue to be reported further away from Afungi, most notably in the Mocimboa da Praia and Macomia districts, where the insurgency is more active and where Mozambican forces operate with more limited involvement by their Rwandan counterparts.

The prevention of future human rights violations begs the question of how to ensure accountability for past violations. Any efforts in this regard should consider that speaking up concerning these violations is extremely sensitive and risky for local communities. If all reports of abuses are to come to light, a thorough, independent, locally-grounded investigation is needed.



Mozambique LNG Project

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LEAD CONSULTANT

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Executive summary

The Mozambique LNG project in Cabo Delgado has resumed operations following disruptions caused by an Islamist insurgency. The resumption of the project has been largely enabled by the deployment of the Rwanda Defence Force (RDF) troops since mid-2021, which has created a protective buffer around Palma, Mocímboa da Praia, and the Afungi Peninsula. While this deployment has secured key LNG assets, uncertainty remains over its long-term sustainability and broader provincial impact.

RDF deployment and operational effectiveness

The RDF's initial deployment demonstrated considerable operational effectiveness. Its forces rapidly retook Palma and Mocímboa da Praia, restoring access to vital logistical routes and the port of Mocímboa da Praia, while dismantling insurgent bases and reducing the risk of attacks on LNG infrastructure. RDF operations were carried out with discipline and relative adherence to civilian protection standards, in contrast to the Mozambican Armed Forces (FADM), whose alleged abuses had alienated local populations. Since the initial offensives, RDF operations have shifted to a static, asset-focused model, establishing an enclave-style security perimeter around LNG infrastructure and key urban hubs. Patrols are concentrated in Palma, Mocímboa da Praia, and Afungi, providing robust protection for high-value assets, but engagement in surrounding rural districts is limited. While effective for project security, this approach leaves peripheral areas exposed and does not address broader insurgent threats.

Status of the insurgency

Islamic State in Mozambique (ISM), locally known as Ahlu Sunna Waljama'a, retains significant operational capability. Fighter numbers are lower than at the insurgency's peak, estimated to be several hundred in 2025, down from several thousand in early 2021. However, the group maintains mobile, adaptive units capable of multi-day raids, coordinated attacks, and near-shore maritime operations, with groups of 50 to 100 militants equipped with sophisticated weaponry. ISM controls parts of the N380 highway, posing a threat to key supply routes. Its focus has also shifted toward state and security targets rather than indiscriminate civilian attacks, though violence against civilians persists. The group's operational flexibility allows it to adapt rapidly to RDF tactics and exploit security gaps in rural districts. Despite reductions in manpower, ISM demonstrates resilience, mobility, and the capacity to challenge high-value targets if security guarantees weaken.

Effectiveness and limitations of counterinsurgency operations

Counterinsurgency efforts in Cabo Delgado have produced mixed results. Rwanda's enclave-focused model stabilises high-value economic assets but leaves peripheral districts vulnerable to insurgent activity. The "islands of security" approach prioritises international investment over civilian protection, potentially entrenching local grievances. ISM continues to exploit these grievances and governance gaps, poverty, and ethnic tensions, demonstrating resilience despite territorial losses. Meanwhile, the FADM remains ill-prepared to assume primary responsibility for security provision, limiting prospects for autonomous provincial security. Overall, the RDF provides short-term protection; however, the sustainability of counterinsurgency gains remains uncertain.

Financial and political underpinnings

The RDF's presence is sustained through a combination of donor, bilateral, and corporate support, alongside Mozambique's contributions. The European Union (EU), via the European Peace Facility, subsidises salaries and logistics, embedding the mission within a multilateral framework, while TotalEnergies and other private actors fund



additional site-level security. Rwanda has also secured commercial benefits, with contracts for infrastructure, energy provision, and security services awarded to firms linked to Crystal Ventures, perceived to be the ruling party's investment arm. The deployment enhances Rwanda's regional influence, contributing to a broader "military diplomacy" strategy.

However, these arrangements embed political and reputational risks, including allegations of blurred lines between military deployment and commercial interests. Additionally, Rwanda's involvement in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) introduces potential diplomatic and operational pressures.

Host-state capacity and dependence on the RDF

Mozambique's domestic security capacity remains limited. The FADM continues to exhibit operational weaknesses, corruption, indiscipline, and human rights abuses, undermining trust and effectiveness. Despite EU training initiatives, including Quick Reaction Forces and mentoring under the European Union Military Assistance Mission (EUMAM), institutional improvements have been slow, and the FADM remains largely incapable of securing the province independently. The RDF functions primarily as a substitute for domestic forces rather than a capacity-building partner, in contrast to Rwanda's approach in the Central African Republic (CAR). This reliance ensures short-term asset security but risks long-term fragility if RDF resources or donor support are reduced.

Bilateral cooperation and strategic framework

A Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) signed on 27 August 2025 provides legal clarity for Rwandan troops, while a trade and investment memorandum positions Mozambique as a gateway for Rwandan commercial interests in southern Africa. Continued military coordination also reinforces the RDF's central role in counterinsurgency operations. The SOFA formalises the deployment but does not expand its mandate, meaning continuity remains dependent on bilateral commitment, donor support, and Rwanda's strategic priorities.

Political and macroeconomic considerations

The security environment is also shaped by Mozambique's domestic political and fiscal context. Governance challenges, a legitimacy deficit following the 2024 elections, and weak benefit-sharing in Cabo Delgado exacerbate local grievances. Budget constraints, including a 9 percent reduction in 2025 allocations, limit defence and social spending, while debt service and wages absorb significant resources. Dependence on Rwanda and EU funding introduces vulnerabilities to any reduction in support. Meanwhile, Rwanda's internal political dynamics, particularly succession uncertainty, may also affect the durability of its deployment.

Outlook

Over the next 12 to 24 months, RDF deployment is expected to remain the primary security guarantee for LNG operations, with the enclave around Palma, Mocímboa da Praia, and Afungi reducing the likelihood of direct attacks. Donor and corporate support will likely sustain this arrangement until at least the end of 2027. Beyond 24 months, fiscal pressures in Mozambique and Rwanda's regional commitments, particularly in the DRC, may redirect resources. Peripheral districts also remain exposed, allowing ISM to maintain operational capacity and test security limits. Long-term resilience in Cabo Delgado thus depends on Mozambique developing sustainable domestic security capacity, continued donor and corporate engagement, and Rwanda maintaining its strategic commitment in the context of regional political dynamics. While immediate operational risk is mitigated, systemic vulnerabilities persist, including insurgent resilience, fiscal fragility, and reliance on external actors, which should inform LNG stakeholders' assessment of project sustainability and long-term risk exposure.



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