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HRW – Human Rights Watch

Mozambique: Security Forces Abusing Suspected Insurgents

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Armed Islamist Group Attacking Villages in Cabo Delgado Province

(Johannesburg) – Mozambique (<https://www.hrw.org/africa/mozambique>) security forces have been implicated in serious abuses while fighting an armed Islamist group in the northern province of Cabo Delgado.

Since August 2018, the security forces have allegedly arbitrarily detained, ill-treated, and summarily executed dozens of people they suspected of belonging to an armed Islamist group .

“The Mozambican authorities should take immediate action to end abuses by their security forces and punish those responsible,” said Dewa Mavhinga (<https://www.hrw.org/about/people/dewa-mavhinga>), Southern Africa director at Human Rights Watch. “Abuses by insurgents never justify violating people’s rights, and the security forces should be protecting the people in Cabo Delgado, not abusing them.”

Human Rights Watch interviewed 12 victims and witnesses of abuse in person or by phone, along with security force personnel and journalists between November 10 and 27.

Many of the reported abuses followed attacks on villages by an armed Islamist group known locally as both Al-Sunna wa Jama’a and Al-Shabab, though it has no publicly known link to the Somali armed group Al-Shabab. The insurgent attacks in Cabo Delgado province that began in October 2017 resulted in a two-day lockdown of the area and a large-scale military response. Since then, the insurgents have carried out more than 60 attacks in six districts, forcing thousands (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/06/19/mozambique-armed-groups-burn-villages>) of people to flee their homes. The group has been responsible for summary killings, looting, and arson

Security forces arriving in villages several hours after an attack have arrested young men and others who refuse to cooperate with them. In the most recent reported incident, on November 23, police stationed in the village of Chicuaia Velha, Nangane district arrested several villagers, mostly men who had not fled following the attack. The night before, insurgents armed with machetes and knives had raided the village, set fire to homes, and killed at least 12 people, including women and children.

A senior army official, who asked not to be named, said that the suspects were taken to a “temporary screening” at makeshift barracks in Mocimboa da Praia district. “Those who did not flee the village must explain what they saw, why they did not run away, and whether they recognized any of attackers,” he said. “It’s a normal procedure. If they are innocent, we will let them go.” One week later, these men have not been charged, taken before a judge, or had access to their lawyers or family members, in violation of Mozambican and international law.

Four men described being detained in August after government forces carried out raids on alleged insurgent training camps in Palma district. Two men, ages 26 and 32, said that soldiers apprehended them while they were cutting wood in the forest on August 11, and forced them onto a military track. One demanded to know where they were being taken. A soldier, accusing them of being armed group members, beat him with his AK47 assault rifle in the head and stomach.

They spent the night in military barracks in the forest with about a dozen other detainees. The next morning, the soldiers took them to Mieze jail, about 20 kilometers from the provincial capital, Pemba. The two detainees were released on August 16 without charge.

Two other men said that they were arrested together with an alleged Islamic religious leader in Palma and eight other men on August 18, two days after security forces had attacked a suspected insurgent base in Palma district. The detainees were taken to military barracks in Mocimboa da Praia district and questioned overnight.

“There were many others there,” said one of the detainees, a 23-year-old farmer. “We were all told to remove our shirts and sit on the floor. The soldiers would come and take us one by one to the forest, and then we would hear gunshots followed by screaming. Some of them did not come back.” A 25-year-old farmer also said that several of the detainees were taken outside, gunshots and screams followed, and the men never returned. The two men said they were released the next morning. Two others from the group were later transferred to Pemba and are facing trial for state security crimes.

Two soldiers in Macomia district confirmed killing suspects, but would not give details, fearful of being identified. One said that they had received “orders from their superiors” to eliminate the “bandits.” He said he understood those words to mean that they should

“kill them whenever it is possible.” A third soldier shared photos of corpses of alleged insurgents that were extrajudicially executed during an operation in Nangade district on November 13.

Under Mozambican law (http://www.africanchildinfo.net/cir/Legislation%20Per%20Country/Mozambique/mozambique_civilcode_1966_pr.pdf), military personnel are prohibited from holding detainees in military barracks. Suspects detained during military operations must be handed over to police, who will proceed with arrests and either release the suspects or charge them within 48 hours. Mozambique’s constitution says that detainees must be informed at the moment of arrest about accusations against them and the reasons for their detention.

Inacio Dina, a police spokesman responsible for communications about the military operations in Cabo Delgado, denied that suspects were being questioned at military barracks. He told Human Rights Watch on November 27 that “any person found to be engaging in suspicious activities in the regions attacked by armed groups is handed over to the police.” He also said that the security forces on the ground include various branches of the police, secret services, and army, “each of them exercising their mandate according to the law.”

On September 30, a court in Pemba began the trial of 189 people, including Mozambicans, Tanzanians, Congolese, Somalis, and Burundians, suspected of belonging to the armed Islamist group. Forty-two defendants are women. They are accused of homicide, use of prohibited weapons, crimes against state security, and public disorder. A state prosecutor for Cabo Delgado province, who asked not to be named, said that many of the defendants had accused soldiers of detaining them for several weeks before handing them over to police, using torture to force them to confess, and in some cases killing unarmed suspected insurgents in the bush.

In November, a team from the Mozambican National Human Rights Commission visited the prisons (<https://allafrica.com/stories/201811290059.html>) where the defendants are being held. They documented serious human rights abuses, including overcrowding so severe that prisoners were forced to sleep standing up. The commission chairman, Luis Bitone, told the media that residents of the villages (<https://www.tsf.pt/internacional/lusofonia/interior/por-medo-ha-quem-deixe-de-dormir-em-casa-relatos-de-violencia-a-norte-de-mocambique-10186642.html>) the armed group targeted have found bodies scattered in the woods and that they are afraid to sleep in their homes because of the attacks.

Allegations of security force abuses against suspected Islamist insurgents have emerged previously, leading President Filipe Nyusi to publicly condemn those acts. In October, the state news agency, AIM (<https://clubofmozambique.com/news/terrorist-suspects-must-not-be-killed-says-nyusi-aim-report/>), quoted him saying he had instructed the security forces in Cabo Delgado not to kill suspected members of the armed group.

“President Nyusi publicly condemning the abuses was an important step,” Mavhinga said. “But to really stop the abuses, those responsible for past abuses need to be held to account.”

ecoi.net summary:

Cabo Delgado province: Security forces have allegedly arbitrarily detained, ill-treated, and summarily executed dozens of suspected members of an armed Islamist group



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