

Mozambique: Child Soldiers Used in Raid on Northern Town

Islamist Armed Group Deploys Boys as Young as 13 in Attack on Macomia



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Rwandan Counter-Terrorism Special Units and Mozambique police patrol streets in Palma, Cabo Delgado province, Mozambique on December 18, 2023. © 2023 Cyrile Ndegeya/Anadolu via Getty Images

(Johannesburg) – An armed group linked to the Islamic State (ISIS) in northern [Mozambique](#) used boys as young as 13 to raid and loot the town of Macomia, in Cabo Delgado province, on May 10, 2024, Human Rights Watch said today. It is unclear if the children also engaged in fighting against government armed forces. The recruitment and use of children under age 15 as child soldiers is a war crime.

The armed group, known locally as Al-Shabab, attacked Macomia to loot shops and warehouses before [targeting](#) government forces' positions in the town, triggering heavy [fighting](#). Several witnesses, including relatives of the boys, told Human Rights Watch that among the Al-Shabab fighters who took part in the raid were dozens of boys carrying ammunition belts and AK-style assault rifles. Two people from the same family said they recognized their 13-year-old nephew among the children.

“The armed group Al-Shabab’s use of children as soldiers is cruel, unlawful, and only adds to the horrors of Cabo Delgado’s conflict,” said [Zenaida Machado](#), senior Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch. “Al-Shabab should immediately release all children in their ranks and stop any further recruitment.”

Human Rights Watch spoke by phone with six residents who witnessed the Macomia raid, as well as two humanitarian aid workers in the region. They said that the fighters, including dozens of boys, arrived in the town at around 4 a.m. on May 10. They were divided into at least three groups

of “hundreds,” witnesses said. One group wandered around the town, speaking to residents and looting shops and warehouses.

Footage seen by Human Rights Watch, and now widely shared on social media, appeared to show some of the fighters, including a child, carrying guns and freely moving near a local market. According to witnesses and media reports, a second group [engaged](#) in fighting against joint South African and Mozambican army troops stationed in the town, while a third group blocked the main road to Macomia, where they [reportedly ambushed](#) military vehicles carrying South African troops serving with the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM).

President Filipe Nyusi [confirmed](#) the raid, which took place in an area that the Southern African military mission previously controlled. The military mission is gradually [withdrawing](#) from the country ahead of a July deadline.

More than 700 people [fled](#) the fighting that started on May 10 and continued through May 12, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Some of the displaced sought to hide in the surrounding forests according to [press reports](#) and [footage](#) shared online. At least 10 people, mostly soldiers, were [reportedly](#) killed in the fighting.

One of the people who hid in surrounding forests was the 22-year-old trader, Abu Rachide. He told Human Rights Watch that upon arrival in the town, fighters engaged peacefully with people and told residents not to fear or flee as they had “come only for the food.” He said: “I and my sister decided to flee anyway because we didn’t want to take risks, but many people stayed behind.”

Abu Rachide said that he saw dozens of children among the fighters, including his 13-year-old nephew who had been missing since a January 10 [attack in Mucojo](#). “I saw him with my own eyes carrying a big gun and ammunition belt and acting like a confident big man,” Abu Rachide said. When he called out to his nephew, Abu Rachide said, the boy waved at him and then continued on his mission.

Abu Rachide’s sister, Aida, confirmed his account. “The boy seemed very comfortable carrying a gun and taking instructions from the [older ones],” she said. “I kept wondering how he became a fighter like that in just four months.”

A 47-year-old trader, Jamal Jorge, who decided to stay in the market to monitor events, said most of the fighters were children and young men who spoke Swahili and Kimwani, a language spoken on the coast of Cabo Delgado. He said he saw more than 20 children among the fighters. “There in the market, I only saw children, some a bit older, maybe 17 or 20 years,” he said. “But to me, most of them were children not older than 16 years.”

Al-Shabab fighters occupied Macomia town for more than 24 hours, abandoning the area on the afternoon of May 11, then moving toward Mucojo, various sources said. Before departing the town, they looted food from various shops and warehouses of humanitarian groups, two humanitarian workers said. Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors without Borders or MSF) [said](#) it had suspended its activities in Macomia following the violence.

Mozambique’s Al-Shabab have long used children in combat. In 2021, Human Rights Watch [reported](#) that the group was kidnapping boys and using them to fight government forces in violation of the international prohibition on the use of child soldiers.

The United Nations [Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict](#), which Mozambique ratified in 2004, prohibits non-state armed groups from recruiting children under 18. The [Rome Statute](#) of the International Criminal Court categorizes as a war crime the conscription, enlistment, or active use of children under age 15 in active hostilities during armed conflict. The African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child further [notes](#) that non-state armed groups are bound by international humanitarian law.

“Al-Shabab’s ability to recruit, train and use child soldiers across Cabo Delgado is very concerning,” Machado said. “The Mozambican authorities, armed groups, and international partners should step up their efforts to ensure that children stay safe in school and at home and keep children off the battlefield.”