

International

Mocimboa da Praia: Mozambican ghost town after jihadists ejected

Al-Shabab campaign killed 3,100 people, uprooted 800,000 from their homes

MOCIMBOA DA PRAIA: Except for dozens of soldiers on patrol, Mocimboa da Praia, occupied by jihadists until just a few days ago, is a ghost town of abandoned and burnt-out buildings.

A few houses remain intact in the Mozambican port city, bearing signs that they were recently inhabited by the extremist militants. Some have Swahili inscriptions for "do not enter" or "do not destroy" on the doors. Rwandan and Mozambican soldiers have been on patrol since they forced out the militants last weekend, an AFP correspondent embedded with the military from the East African country, said.

The two armies announced on Sunday they had driven out jihadists who had been occupying the strategic city for the past year. A Rwandan army commander, who only gave his name as Frank, said the insurgents left after four consecutive days of fighting.

"The enemy was trying to attack us since his center of gravity was under fire, (but) at the end we managed to (oust) him," said the officer, speaking in English. The city lies around 60 kilometers (37 miles) south of Palma, the hub of a \$20-billion gas exploration project. It was overrun by the jihadists in August 2020 — a watershed moment in their bloody campaign.

Mocimboa da Praia was where an obscure group, locally referred to as Al-Shabab, first launched its attacks October 2017. With its occupation, the town became the de-facto headquarters of the group,

which in 2018 declared its affiliation with the so-called Islamic State.

Mopping up operations

The group's campaign, focusing especially on remote villages, has killed at least 3,100 people and uprooted more than 800,000 from their homes. At the end of March, after a brazen attack on the coastal town Palma, the IS released a video said to have been shot in Mocimboa da Praia, showing more than 100 mostly young armed men, wearing fatigues and civilian shirts, with red bandanas tied around their heads. Government forces had struggled to regain control of the city until Rwanda sent in 1,000 troops—the first foreign country to deploy forces in Mozambique's fight against the extremists.

Mozambican army commander Cristovao Chume said there had been little resistance from the insurgents during the raid, with no deaths reported.

But the troops recovered an arsenal of abandoned weapons, including assault rifles and rocket-propelled grenades. "Clean-up operations are taking place," said Chume. A partially torched military tank was seen abandoned on the roadside. Elsewhere stood a torched stack of rusty cargo containers. There is no water or electricity. The provincial government is starting to plan for the return of the population, who previously numbered around 120,000.

"We have to organize a way forward for the people of Mocimboa da Praia to return," Valige Tauabo, governor of Cabo Delgado province, said during a



MOCIMBOA DA PRAIA, Mozambique: A convoy of armored vehicles is seen patrolling in Mocimboa da Praia, northern Mozambique, Friday. — AFP

visit to the town on Thursday.

'Insurgents can blend with locals'

However, analysts consider it too early to even contemplate a return. "It is very risky to allow the population to return at this time because it will be difficult to distinguish the population from the insurgents," said Enio Chingotwane, a peace and security expert at the Center for Strategic and International

Studies in Maputo. The insurgents "can easily blend in with the population as normal people and then create instability," he said. According to Joao Feijo, a researcher with the Observatory of the Rural Environment (OMR) who studies the insurgency, the jihadists may have retreated strategically and could be lurking close by. "They may have dispersed and then blended with the population or be in trenches," he suggested. — AFP

2,000 evacuated after landslide in northern India

NEW DELHI: At least 2,000 people were evacuated on Friday after a massive landslide in India's ecologically fragile Himalayan north blocked a major river, officials said. The people were evacuated from 13 villages in the Lahaul area of Himachal Pradesh state as a "preventative measure" in case of flash floods, a senior district official told AFP.

Hundreds of tons of rocks and other debris slid into and partially blocked the Chenab—one of the biggest rivers in the region—blocking the flow of water for a few hours. This is the second landslide to hit the northern state bordering Tibet this week.

On Wednesday 12 people were killed after a bus and other vehicles travelling on a road were buried by rocks and mud. Sixteen people are still unaccounted for, according to local media reports. Thirteen others were pulled out of the rubble. Landslides are a regular danger in the region, particularly in the monsoon season, but experts say they are becoming more common.

Climate change is making the monsoon more erratic and melting glaciers, massive chunks of which can break off. Experts also blame construction work on hydroelectric dams and deforestation.

In February, a ferocious flash flood hurtled down a remote valley in neighboring Uttarakhand state, killing around 200 people. — AFP

UN raises alarm on 'mass rape' in southeast DR Congo

GENEVA: The United Nations raised the alarm on Friday over widespread, systematic sexual violence in the southeastern Democratic Republic of Congo, saying women were reporting armed groups carrying out mass rape. UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, said its staff were hearing horrific testimonies from forcibly displaced persons in the DR Congo's Tanganyika Province.

The agency is "gravely concerned about incidents of widespread and systematic sexual violence against Congolese women and girls", spokeswoman Shabia Mantoo told reporters in Geneva. "In just the past two weeks, humanitarian partners in the Kongo and Mbulula health zones, have recorded 243 incidents of rape, 48 of which involved minors, in 12 different villages."

The actual figures are thought to be even higher as reporting of gender-based violence remains a taboo in most communities. "The attacks are reportedly being carried out by rival armed groups competing to maintain control over mining areas—especially gold mines—and as retaliation against government-led military operations," said Mantoo.

"Civilians find themselves trapped in the middle of intense confrontations between different groups. Our staff have heard horrific testimonies of extreme violence. Forcibly displaced persons have accused armed groups of carrying out mass rape as women attempt to flee their homes." She said some women and girls had been abducted and used as sex slaves, while ransoms have been demanded from families in exchange for their freedom. According to UN estimates, nearly 310,000 people have been uprooted by insecurity and violence and are currently displaced in Tanganyika Province.

Mantoo said more than 23,000 people had been displaced since May in the province's northern Kongo Territory alone, according to local authorities, with most having fled insecurity multiple times.

The UNHCR called on the authorities to scale up security in the so-called "triangle of death" in the wider region to protect civilians, allow humanitarian access, and launch investigations to bring the perpetrators to justice.

The agency said it had received 36 percent of the \$205 million needed for its operations in the DR Congo. Meanwhile, three Democratic Republic of Congo soldiers were killed in fighting with armed groups in the east of the country that also left eight militiamen dead, a military spokesman said on Friday. — AFP



BANGKOK: A pro-democracy protester uses a slingshot against police during a demonstration calling for the resignation of prime minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha over the Thai government's handling of the COVID-19 coronavirus crisis, in Bangkok Friday. — AFP

Three injured as Thai police fire rubber bullets at Bangkok rally

BANGKOK: Three protesters were injured when Thai police fired tear gas and rubber bullets at a Bangkok rally Friday—the third time this week—as coronavirus cases soar and anger builds over the government's handling of the pandemic. The kingdom is grappling with its worst virus outbreak so far and registered a new daily high of 23,418 infections on Friday.

The sluggish rollout of Thailand's vaccination program and financial pain from restrictions is heaping political pressure on Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha's government. Protesters gathered in Bangkok at a major intersection by Victory Monument, defying a ban on public gatherings, and set fire to sacks of rotting fruit to symbolize the economic hardship of farmers. "These fruits can't be sold because of government failure (to manage the virus and the economy)," a female protester told a crowd of several hundred people. Demonstrators attempted to march on Prayut's residence inside a military barracks holding a large banner that read: "Prayut must get out immediately."

Police used barbed wire and rows of shipping containers to block their path while officers fired tear gas, rubber bullets and water cannon. Deputy National Police spokesman Kissana Phathanacharoen said protesters targeted officers with ping pong

bombs, slingshots, bricks, and firecrackers. Fourteen motorbikes were impounded, he said. At least three protesters were injured including youth activist Thanat "Nat" Thanakitamnuay, an emergency medical centre said.

At protests on Tuesday and Wednesday in the same area, police used water cannon, tear gas and rubber bullets and some demonstrators threw firecrackers at officers. Bangkok police, facing accusations of heavy-handedness, have insisted their approach is in line with the law and urged people not to jeopardize public health and safety.

"There is clear evidence that some people among the protest group have contracted COVID-19," Metropolitan Police Bureau chief Phukphong Phongpetra told reporters on Friday. A young protester who blew his own hand off while throwing a firework during Wednesday's rally has tested positive for coronavirus, local media reported.

Last year a youth-led pro-democracy protest movement began in Thailand that at its peak drew tens of thousands of people to rallies demanding the resignation of Prayut, the former army chief who came to power in a 2014 coup. But the movement lost momentum earlier this year as COVID-19 cases surged and its leaders were detained. — AFP

Police raid Nicaragua paper that branded govt a 'dictatorship'

MANAGUA: Nicaraguan police on Friday raided the premises of independent newspaper La Prensa, which had branded the government a "dictatorship" after being forced to suspend its print edition.

The publication announced the suspension on Thursday, blaming customs for refusing to release its paper imports. La Prensa was the only national independent daily newspaper remaining in circulation at a time when the government is accused of repressing opponents.

Nicaragua is gearing up for a general election in November but since the beginning of June, authorities have detained 32 opposition figures, including seven with aspirations of challenging President Daniel Ortega, who is seeking a fourth successive term. According to an official police statement, the newspaper's managers are being investigated for "customs fraud and money laundering."

Police took control of the premises at midday and said the newspaper's warehouses were in "custody."

During the raid, some of the paper's journalists said internet access and electricity were cut off, while officers prevented them from using their mobile telephones inside the building. Pro-government media published photos of La Prensa's warehouses on social media, claiming they



MANAGUA: In this file photo, a view of local La Prensa newspapers in Managua. — AFP

had no reason to halt their print version.

"In the warehouses of La Prensa newspaper, there is plenty of paper available so the company can continue printing its newspaper," Canal 4 posted on social media. However, La Prensa staff said that the amount of paper was not enough to print even one edition. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) and its special rapporteur for freedom of expression criticized the raid and condemned the "constant official persecution of the press in Nicaragua." — AFP

News in brief

BBC journalist can't re-enter Russia

LONDON: The BBC's Moscow correspondent said yesterday she was told by the Russian authorities that she "can't ever come back to Russia" after her visa was not renewed and she was effectively expelled from the country. Moscow told veteran correspondent Sarah Rainsford that she would have to leave the country when her current visa expires in August, at a time of simmering tensions between Russia and the West and a crackdown on independent media. "This is not a failure to renew my visa, although technically that's kind of what it is. I'm being expelled, and I've been told that I can't come back ever," Rainsford told BBC Radio 4. — AFP

Guatemala emergency over Delta

GUATEMALA CITY: Guatemala has declared a new state of emergency and will impose an overnight curfew from today to contain a surge in COVID infections due to the Delta variant, President Alejandro Giammattei said. The 30-day state of emergency is being implemented due to a rebound in cases attributed to the "more aggressive" Delta variant, Giammattei said in a televised address on Friday. "The Delta variant is highly contagious. It is causing new outbreaks and many governments have had to impose new restrictions on their populations as a mitigation measure. Guatemala cannot be the exception," he said. — AFP

Canada govt workers to get jobs

OTTAWA: The Canadian government announced Friday it will require all federal workers and most commercial rail, air and ship passengers to get vaccinated against COVID-19, amid a surge in virus cases due to the Delta variant. "We know that vaccines are the best way to end this pandemic," said Dominic LeBlanc, a government minister in charge of Canada's federal bureaucracy. "We expect federal public servants to want to comply with this mandatory requirement," he added. — AFP

Judge in Haiti steps down

PORT-AU-PRINCE: The judge named earlier this week to lead the judicial investigation into the assassination of Haitian president Jovenel Moise said Friday he would not take on the case. "We are removing ourselves from the said case for personal reasons and ordering its return to the dean of this court," judge Mathieu Chanlatte said in a letter to the Port-au-Prince Court of First Instance after being named on Monday. Moise was killed when a hit team burst into the presidential residence on July 7 and shot him dead. His wife Martine was wounded but survived. — AFP

US envoys press Tunisia on democracy

TUNIS: Tunisian President Kais Saied on Friday dismissed US concerns over threats to democracy in the North African country more than a month after he suspended parliament, raising charges of a coup. "There is no reason to worry about the subject of freedom, justice and democracy" in Tunisia, Saied said in a statement from his office during a visit by a high-level US delegation. The president said he took the "exceptional measures" in July in line with the constitution to "respond to the expectations of the people against a backdrop of political, economic and social crisis". — AFP