News



Joseanair Hermes, program manager for Catholic Relief Services in the Cabo Delgado province, at left, distributes relief aid to families displaced by armed conflict in the district of Metuge in the province. (Courtesy of Catholic Relief Services/Caritas/Ambrosio de Jesus Domingos Damião)



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A year after Pope Francis' visit to Mozambique, where the pontiff lauded the leaders of the country for forging a peace deal after decades of civil conflict, the southeast African nation is now besieged by an Islamic insurgency that is displacing hundreds of thousands and driving some to the edge of hopelessness.

The conflict in the Cabo Delgado province, on the country's northern border with Tanzania, is raging on without resolution. Many are concerned that President Filipe Nyusi, who is widely seen as an autocratic and corrupt ruler, will be unable to end it.

Some caught up in the worst of the violence, like 19-year-old Anita Martins, have even considered suicide as the only route of escape. Martins related to NCR how she had seen friends and family attacked by the insurgents, who seek to set up a separate Islamic state in Cabo Delgado.

"We often thought that death was the only solution," Martins said of what she saw. "When they arrived in the Quissanga district, where I lived with my parents until a few weeks ago, they were very bad and cruel, and they burned our house and all of our property."

The United Nations has described the situation in Mozambique as a worsening conflict that, together with an already precarious humanitarian situation, has forced more than 300,000 people, including Martins, to flee.

Mozambique has been affected by successive disasters in recent years, including 2019's Cyclone Idai, which was the deadliest cyclone ever in the southwest Indian Ocean, causing some $2.2 billion in damage.



Women rest at a camp for displaced people in the aftermath of Cyclone Idai March 30, 2019, in Beira, Mozambique. (CNS/Zohra Bensemra, Reuters)

Francis visited Mozambique from Sept. 4-6, 2019. The pontiff made the trip largely to praise a landmark agreement between the country's ruling party and opposition group Renamo that ended decades of conflict.

Although the insurgency in Cabo Delgado has been ongoing since 2017, led by a group known as Ansar al-Sunna, the violence has escalated in recent months.

Jesuit Fr. Alberto Maquia said there has been "an exponential increase in the intensity" of the confrontations between government and insurgency forces, with citizens often caught in-between.

Maquia described the insurgency as a result of "historical feelings of exclusion" from Mozambique's government, located in the capital of Maputo, which is on the other end of the country near its border with South Africa. The Jesuit also cited local people's distrust of national security forces.



Pope Francis and Mozambican President Filipe Nyusi and his wife, Isaura, are pictured as they arrive for a meeting with authorities, leaders of civil society and the diplomatic corps at the Palacio da Ponta Vermelha in Maputo, Mozambique, Sept. 5. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

Insurgents also claim that the government has not done enough to pursue development projects in their region, despite a recent boom in Mozambique's oil and gas sector.

"An initially isolated and poorly organized phenomenon has been growing among population groups marginalized by the state, namely young people and more conservative Muslims," said Maquia.

Mozambique's bishops commented on the crisis in June, saying that the people's suffering in Cabo Delgado "is deeply rooted in social marginalization."

Nyusi, however, blames the conflict on external forces. He has rallied citizens in the country to unite in a bid to end the violence but progress is minimal. Government

forces have made some inroads, taking over some areas previously controlled by the insurgents, but not many.

Women and children have particularly been hard hit by the violence. Relief and aid agencies say some have been forced to engage in transactional sex to escape or to feed their families.

Joseanair Hermes, program manager for Catholic Relief Services' programs in Cabo Delgado, told NCR that many displaced women are forced to travel alone.

"They tell us many of the men have either been killed, captured or are in hiding to avoid being conscripted to fight for the insurgents," said Hermes. "These women and girls left jobs and farmland when they fled."

Hermes further explained: "The grim realities they face place them at high risk of sexual abuse, exploitation and situations where they might engage in transactional sex as the only option they see to survive and feed their families."

In August, two Catholic women religious, Sr. Maria Inez Ramos and Sr. Eliane Costa Santana, were captured by the insurgents. They were released nearly a month later, on Sept. 6. Their congregation, the Sisters of St Joseph of Chambery, said they needed medical care after their release.

Videos of brutal attacks on women have also been circulating on social media. Although security forces have been promising to seek justice for those killed and brutalized by the insurgents, they are struggling.

Families fleeing from the insurgency are arriving in communities that already have inadequate infrastructure. Many are now living in shelters provided by relief agencies. In September, the World Food Programme appealed for $4.7 million every month to help meet the needs of internally displaced persons in Mozambique.

Francis is clearly paying attention to the crisis in Cabo Delgado. In August, he made a call to the bishop of Pemba, the province's capital. The pope told Bishop Luiz Fernando Lisboa he was following developments and praying for the people there.



Bishop Luiz Fernando Lisboa of Pemba, Mozambique, is pictured in an undated photo. (CNS/Courtesy of Diocese of Pemba)

Manuel Jose Nota, director of the Pemba Diocese's Caritas program, said they had been hoped that Francis' visit to Mozambique in 2019 would help quell the violence.

"But there are many interests which are fueling these attacks, many of which are unknown," said Nota. "We continue to pray with the pope that the fighting will end quickly."

As the battles rage on, the plight of Mozambicans affected by the conflict appear to be worsening.

"I feel very sad and insecure because the situation has not yet been brought under control and as long as this situation does not return to normal, the poverty that is already widespread will grow," said Martins.

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