



REDE MOCAMBICANA DOS
DEFENSORES DE DIREITOS HUMANOS
RMDDH

Sunday, March 26, 2023 | Year IV, NO. 43 | Director: Prof. Adriano Nuvunga | English

AFFECTED BY VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Challenges faced by human rights defenders returning to areas of origin in Cabo Delgado



Créditos: Tendex



Credits: Integrity Magazine

It's been just over five years since Cabo Delgado plunged into unprecedented violent extremism. Around 10 districts were directly affected by the conflict which left more than four thousand dead and forced the displacement of close to 800 thousand people, leaving behind a whole life and unfulfilled dreams. Physical and psychological affections are visible and it will take a long time for them to disappear. Asking someone who has faced death to talk about their past is like an inhuman act on our part. The pain is immeasurable and victims want to forget the disappearance, kidnapping, maiming or death of a relative, neighbor or friend.

In the struggle for survival, the victims found safe places in reception centers, or in the homes of family members to reckon with their lives, in the hope that everything would return to normal. Amid so much suffering and despair, there are small stories of resilience: "This is not the first war I have witnessed. I was a victim of the 16-year war, but God was always with us", said Issufo Abdul, human rights defender from Mocímboa da Praia, in a brief conversation with RMDDH/Cabo Delgado.

The forced displacement of populations living in districts plagued by violent extremism has also affected many human rights defenders. At this time, and despite the apparent improvement in security conditions in the north of Cabo Delgado and the ongoing reconstruction process, human rights defenders are struggling with uncertainties and challenges regarding the pursuit of their human rights activities in the future.

Among the groups of displaced people who have returned to their origins, there are human rights defenders who, due to the conflict and the humanitarian crisis, have been forced to "interrupt" their role in society to claim the same basic rights as the bulk of the population have complained. A situation that turned them into mere spectators of the precarious social conditions they encountered on their return to their areas of origin. Almost everything is missing, and the cost of living has skyrocketed due to speculation on the prices of basic necessities. State institutions work at half gas, or rather, not all of them have (re) opened their doors, especially those in the justice sector.

This situation makes it difficult for defenders to resume their activities in defense of human rights. Linked to this is the situation of infrastructure destroyed and vandalized by violent extremists. These are work offices, office furniture, and consumables for human rights defenders that, unfortunately, are not part of the infrastructure that will be rehabilitated as part of the government program for the reconstruction of Cabo Delgado. Some defenders reported that many cohesion and social inclusion projects were attributed to organizations based in Pemba, excluding local activists working in the defense of human rights, which limits their action.

Even facing these problems, there is hope that with the evolution of security conditions in areas affected by violent extremism, human rights defenders will once again do their work in their communities. "Helping others is priceless. We gain in knowing that we have changed something in a person's life and that

helps us to gain respect and recognition. This is the greatest gift a human rights defender can receive", says Issufo Abdul.

The circulation of soldiers in the streets wielding weapons of war is one of the ways to protect populations and guarantee security, but it reveals that an armed peace is being lived. "It feels like something could happen at any moment." Another new phenomenon that was reported by Fabião Capece, a human rights defender in Mocímboa da Praia, is the increase in criminality, with emphasis on robberies on public roads, practices that were non-existent in the past. This situation draws attention since Mocímboa da Praia was the first district to register attacks by violent extremists and one of the most affected by the conflict. The municipal town of Mocímboa da Praia was one of the first to suffer a terrorist attack and the one that remained under the control of violent extremists for the longest time in the entire province of Cabo Delgado.



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