

US Special Forces sent into Mozambique amid growing civil war

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Amid an escalating armed conflict in Mozambique, the Pentagon has sent US Special Operations troops into the southern African nation. The deployment of these troops, described as “trainers” and “advisers,” and justified in the name of the endless “war on terrorism,” provides fresh confirmation of the Biden administration’s global escalation of US militarism, including on the continent of Africa.

Announced in the middle of last month, the US deployment has come amid a sharp escalation in the civil war being fought in Mozambique’s northern-most province of Cabo Delgado, where the Mozambican government is confronting an insurgency among that region’s predominantly Muslim population.

The latest fighting has centered in the town of Palma, a hub for the exploitation of the country’s natural gas fields, which was seized by the rebels at the end of last month, sending an estimated 11,000 people fleeing to the port city of Pemba on the Indian Ocean. According to the United Nations, some 670,000 have been displaced since fighting began in the region in 2017.

Commander Chongo Vidigal, the chief of the government forces sent to retake Palma from the rebels told the media Sunday that the area was now “safe.” An earlier attempt to bring reporters to the scene, however, was aborted after the helicopter flying them to the town came under fire.

The main objective of the military operation was to secure the site of a \$60 billion liquefied natural gas project initiated by the French energy giant Total, which has demanded a 15-mile secure perimeter as a condition for its continued presence. Having resumed operations only on March 24 after shutting down its facilities following an earlier rebel offensive at the beginning of the year, Total has shut down again, pulling all of its employees out of the region. In

addition to the French-based energy transnational, Italy’s ENI and the US-based ExxonMobil also have interests in Mozambique’s natural gas reserves, believed to be among the largest on the planet.

Just days before the dispatch of the US special forces troops, on March 11, Washington designated “ISIS-Mozambique” as a “Foreign Terrorist Organization,” paving the way for the US military intervention. The US Embassy in Maputo said that Washington “is committed to supporting Mozambique with a multifaceted and holistic approach to counter and prevent the spread of terrorism and violent extremism.”

The “ISIS-Mozambique” label is an invention of the US State Department. Locally, the insurgents are known as al-Shabab, Arabic for “the youth,” and have no connection to the Islamist insurgent group based in Somalia that goes by the same name. While the Islamic State has issued videos falsely claiming responsibility for the Mozambican insurgency’s attacks, there is no evidence of operational links between ISIS and the rebellion in northern Mozambique, much less of it posing any threat of international terrorism.

The government of President Filipe Nyusi in Maputo, Mozambique’s southern capital, has pushed the “terrorist” label, and Washington has eagerly embraced it. Their aim is to cover up the complex political and social roots of the conflict and to justify a counterinsurgency campaign aimed at defending the interests of a ruling national oligarchy, transnational energy corporations and global finance capital.

The roots of the insurgency in Cabo Delgado lie in the conditions of stark inequality that characterize Mozambique, where, according to figures released before the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, more than half of the population live under conditions of absolute poverty. Wealth is monopolized by a small

ruling elite dominated by the ruling FRELIMO (Front for the Liberation of Mozambique) party and its cohorts and concentrated in Maputo.

Cabo Delgado, among the least developed areas of the country, has seen increasing amounts of wealth extracted from beneath its soil with the development of the natural gas projects as well as ruby mining. Virtually none of this wealth, however, has benefited the impoverished masses. Muslims, who are a minority in Mozambique, constitute more than half of the province's population. Political domination of the province, however, has been monopolized by the predominantly Catholic Makonde ethnic group, of which President Nyusi is a member.

The immediate spark for the armed conflict came in 2017, after the government sought to suppress a layer of Muslim youth, some of them educated in Saudi Arabia, who had sought to introduce a stricter form of Islam and challenged older Muslim clerics with ties to the FRELIMO regime.

FRELIMO, considered at the time one of the most radical of the African nationalist movements, came to power in 1975 after a 10-year-long armed struggle against Portuguese colonialism. Independence came after the overthrow of Portugal's Salazar dictatorship in 1974. It was followed, however, by 15 years of bloody civil war in which the apartheid regime in South Africa, the white minority regime in Rhodesia and the US Central Intelligence Agency backed a counterrevolutionary movement known as RENAMO (Mozambique National Resistance) in a bloody conflict that would claim a million lives.

That today's FRELIMO regime of President Nyusi is calling on the very same forces against which the movement fought in the independence struggle to assist it in suppressing an insurgency speaks volumes about the organic incapacity of the bourgeois nationalist movements to realize the aspirations of the African masses for freedom from foreign domination, democracy and social justice. As in South Africa, Zimbabwe and elsewhere on the African continent, Mozambique's former "freedom fighters" and self-styled Marxists have turned themselves into a gang of corrupt millionaire politicians and comprador capitalists.

In addition to the US Special Operations troops that have been deployed to Mozambique, Portugal, the

country's old colonial master, has announced that it is sending at least 60 special forces "trainers."

The Mozambican security forces have also relied heavily on a South African-based private military contractor, the Dyck Advisory Group (or DAG), which consists of South African mercenaries commanded by Lionel Dyck, a former colonel in the Rhodesian army. The DAG has been charged by Amnesty International with crimes against humanity, including dropping so-called barrel bombs on population centers, firing machine guns from helicopters into crowds and attacking schools and hospitals.

While US troops have gone into Mozambique on the pretext of fighting "terrorism," the Pentagon under President Joe Biden is acting under the same guidelines set by the National Security Strategy enacted under Trump at the beginning of 2018, which stressed that "Great power competition—not terrorism—is now the primary focus of US national security."

Africa constitutes a key battleground in the "great power competition" between the US and China that is undergoing a sharp escalation under the Biden administration. China has surpassed the US as the continent's number one trading partner and lender, while engaging in widespread infrastructure projects under its "Belt and Road" initiative. Washington fears being locked out of a strategically important market and source of raw materials and is seeking to compensate, as elsewhere, with military intervention, with the peoples of Africa suffering the consequences.



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