

## **Expats in Mozambique faced a ring of murderous jihadists. It was do or die**

Written by Administrator  
Saturday, 03 April 2021 19:20 -

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Jane Flanagan, Cape Town 02/04/2021

As the machinegun bullets ripped into the army guardhouse the construction crew realised that this was not another hit-and-run attack by the jihadists of northern Mozambique.

The militants had already captured the post at the Manguna crossroads four miles south of the coastal town Palma. The expats who had dived for cover watched as the rebels advanced.

“They came from two sides of the fence and used the wall as cover,” one of the contractors, a South African in his sixties, said. “They would pull back and return. You could see they had a plan.

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“We are a mixture of expats and locals. They could have killed us all. But they didn’t. They just walked through firing pistols into the air. We were definitely not their targets.”

[This attack](#) was simply the opening thrust in a more ambitious, carefully planned assault by about 100 fighters. Over the following week they would kill hundreds, including a Briton, outfox state security forces, threaten Africa’s biggest foreign gas investment and force an SAS team to scramble from Kenya.

There had been signs that an attack was coming. The rains had ended, marking the arrival of what locals dread as the fighting season. Leaflets had appeared warning Palma’s 65,000 residents they were in its jihadists’ sights.

The capture of the guardhouse on Palma’s periphery was part of a first phase, designed to send the villagers of Manguna fleeing towards Palma, creating a chaotic flow that the insurgents used. To the north, shots were fired at Palma’s airport, sending another surge of terrified villagers clutching whatever they could carry.

The tide became a Trojan horse for the militants. Concealing machetes, automatic weapons and bandanas identifying them as Islamic State jihadists, they swept past police checkpoints around the town’s centre.

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Before the attack, Palma's population had been swelled by an influx of foreign workers building living quarters for Total, the French energy company.

After a ten-week hiatus, the petrochemical giant had resumed work at its \$20 billion Afungi gas facility, secured by a task force of Mozambican army and police. The militants re-grouped in the town centre to prepare for the next phase of the attack in the morning.

From first light, the rebels in red bandanas attacked Palma's military and main civilian targets. They cut the mobile phone network, fired at police stations and government buildings and raided three banks. Anyone on duty was shot. The plundering of army munitions, 80 civilian cars and 90 tonnes of food from a UN warehouse ensured that the attack would be sustained.

News of the unfolding raid raced through the network of expats, who began their emergency drills. The militants' control of the Manguna crossroads ruled out any hope of reaching Total's fortified site a few miles away.

At first many foreigners hunkered down in their compounds where they lived as well as worked but one by one they came under attack. Plan B was to gather at the town's largest hotel, the Amarula Lodge, close to the airport with a well-defined perimeter that was impossible to approach without being seen. It was soon crammed with up to 200 people.

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The expats sent videos and voice messages to fretful relatives in Britain, South Africa and elsewhere. With the local police overrun and the Mozambican army under orders not to leave the Afungi plant, the chances of a rescue were receding. In a text to his mother in South Africa, Wesley Nel, 37, wrote: “Not too sure what’s going to happen”.

He had only just joined his brother Adrian, 40, and stepfather Greg Knox, 55, who had contracts to build camps.

The insurgents surrounded the hotel, cutting it off from the shoreline. Rescue boats were kept at bay by the rebels’ mortars. Helicopter evacuation was the only option but the Russian Mi-17 helicopters of the Paramount mercenary group, newly contracted to the Mozambican government, were not yet up and running. It would have taken them just a few sorties to empty the hotel.

Instead it was left to the smaller helicopters of the Dyck Advisory Group (DAG), a private army from South Africa who were winding up their year-long contract. They had dwindling supplies of fuel and ammunition to rescue those trapped. Refuelling involved a 90-minute flight south to the group’s base in the regional capital Pemba. There was fuel minutes away at Afungi but DAG says it was told by Total it would not supply any.

Under fire from rebels, the DAG helicopters had space for only four or five passengers at a time. Working in teams, one helicopter would land, while a gun ship flew to provide cover against any jihadists. Back in the town, the most brutal phase of the militants’ plan was under way. Clutching a list of wanted state officials and specific “kaffirs”, fighters went house to house.

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A fleeing expat described seeing bodies in the streets, mostly decapitated. "There were mothers with their children and bags, killed as they were running for their lives," the expat said.

Even the apparent mayhem had a purpose. "There will have been a unit tasked with creating absolute terror and chaos," an analyst said. At the Amarula Lodge tensions were rising as supplies of food and water were dwindling. Nick Alexander, a dual-British South African citizen had been making plans for weeks fearing it would be targeted.

"He had found safe spots in bushes on the edge of the compound where he hid stocks of food and water and made plans about where he would hide," his daughter Jayde, 29, said.

By the time it became too dangerous for DAG helicopters to land they had flown 23 people to safety, mostly mothers and children. One local male dignitary is said to have dressed as a woman to grab a seat.

As the helicopters departed, the remaining 160 expats at the hotel faced a terrifying choice: sit tight or make a run for it. Witnesses described seeing jihadist gunmen climbing trees close to the hotel perimeter. "They are literally waiting to be slotted [shot]," one observer said in a voice message to a friend. "Vessels near the beaches are being shot at with mortars."

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The sound of gunfire as the nearby camp of Bonatti, the Italian oil-industry supply company, was overrun concentrated minds. Plans for an escape in a convoy were quickly drawn up.

“It was getting dark,” a contractor who helped devise the plan said. “There was no chance of a late helicopter turning up. It was do or die.

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The hotel was little more than a mile from the shore, which was mostly clear of rebels. The expats tried to guess the safest place to arrange a beach rescue. The most robust 17 vehicles were chosen, with the most confident and experienced drivers at the front.

[Phil Mawer](#) was one of the best-known characters at the lodge. Originally from Somerset, he had been in Mozambique for 18 months and had worked for years in hostile environments. His family described him as “something of a loveable rogue”. Mawer was among 60 or so who wanted in on the escape plan and volunteered to be in one of the first cars on the road. About 100 chose to take their chances at the lodge.

An expat colleague at Afungi with extensive military experience urged the convoy to aim for the Cabo Delgado lighthouse, eight miles to the north, which was still under army control. “Good luck, praying for you all,” his message added. The convoy barely made it beyond the gates. As the front cars swung left on the dirt road, the insurgents were waiting. Lined up on the right to take out the drivers, their shouts of *Allahu Akbar* were drowned out by gunfire. Seven of the lead cars made it out, their bodywork riddled with bullets. Seven of those inside were killed.

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Others cars were forced to a halt. Mawer's body would later be recovered from one that had to be abandoned.

Adrian Nel, who was in one of the cars with his younger brother and their stepfather, was also struck in the volley. The men dragged his body into the bush and hid with it overnight.

Seeing the bloody bedlam ahead, Alexander, an ex-policeman, and two colleagues abandoned their vehicle and raced for the bush, breaking into a government car as they went to steal a Kalashnikov rifle.

With the Amarula Lodge now overrun and on fire, those left behind had a choice between hiding in the bush or running for the beach. There are unconfirmed reports of people frantically racing into the waves only to be picked off by rebels.

By Saturday morning, DAG was flying again. Satellite data showed a ragtag flotilla of rescue boats heading to Palma Bay for a Dunkirk style evacuation. Brendon Bekker, the Zimbabwean head of the construction firm Kea, took part in the operation, sailing from Pemba to Palma in an offshore supply vessel. One of his colleagues was shot dead when rebels fired from the shore.

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“There were people all over the different beaches,” he said. “Everyone fearing for their lives and thinking they weren’t going to make it out.”

Traumatized expats and locals were plucked to safety, either by helicopter or boat, and ferried to a camp at Afungi.

Hours later Isis claimed responsibility for the attack, its most high-profile victory in an insurgency that began in Mozambique in 2017 and has embroiled nearly a million people in a humanitarian crisis. It is arguably its most successful strike by the terrorist group or its affiliates since it lost its last territory in Syria two years ago. DAG pilots turned out to be saviours a month after being accused by Amnesty International of committing war crimes in its efforts to boost Mozambique’s flagging troops. Three SAS soldiers relied on them this week after they were sent from Kenya to Palma to find Mawer, the last missing Briton. It was eventually left to the South African mercenaries to cut him free of a wrecked car and hand him to the British special forces.

Total is now facing criticism for failing to do more to secure its subcontractors despite repeated warnings that Palma would be targeted. It has suspended operations at Afungi to seek yet more assurances from Mozambique’s government that the site is secure.

The number of western contractors still unaccounted for remains unknown. It is possible that some are being held by insurgents. With government forces still under order to prioritise the security of the gas project site, half of Palma, including government buildings and banks, remains under the control of the militants.

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South Africa has sent a C-130 Hercules transport plane to help bring its nationals to safety. Reports from Pretoria suggest that special forces are trying to find about a dozen people still missing.

Total has pulled all its staff out of its huge gas project, Mozambique's Zitamar News reported, throwing into doubt the future of the single biggest investment in Africa.