

A dirty little war in Mozambique



Despite having total air supremacy, mobility on the ground, excellent communications and access to a range of sophisticated hardware – including drones and some of the best squad weapons on the planet – a sophisticated Russian mercenary force has been driven out of northern Mozambique after only months of mixing it with a tough jihadist force that has Somali roots. It goes much further. A confidential report by a senior United Nations official who has served in Afghanistan, both Sudans, Yemen and

elsewhere, and who has communicated directly with this writer, suggested that by moving into northern Mozambique in force, the so-called Islamic State (IS) is only a step away from becoming fully active in South Africa. He said: “This radical movement already has a strong presence that includes military training bases.” Having entered the conflict at the behest of Russia’s President Putin last October – and enjoying complete dominance in the air with an array of *Hind* helicopter gunships as well as Mi-8/17 *Hip* medium twin-turbine transporters

– the Wagner Group has undertaken numerous actions against an enemy that is entrenched in the rugged jungle and mountain-clad terrain fringing southern Tanzania. That much we know. What we do not is how many guerrilla fighters there are, how they are able to bring their weapons – possibly including man-portable air defence systems (MANPADS) – into the country (likely through Tanzania) and how many foreign fighters there are within their ranks. It’s also not clearly understood how this low-key insurgency managed to escalate into an efficient, elite combat force under the very nose of the Mozambique Army. More to the point, this is the first time in recent years that a group with all the advantages and possible backing of one of the major powers has been driven out of a Third World conflagration by force of arms, despite enjoying complete control of the air.

What did emerge in the few months late last year when the Russian mercenary force was active in a vast area adjoining the Tanzanian frontier, is that the latter totally underestimated the ability of a ragged bunch of bush fighters to counter its every move. The jihadi force was better mobilised and a lot better focused than the opposition. Also, it is clear that the jihadis’ intelligence was superior, as every thrust made by the mercenaries and their government allies was met with the kind of hard-line bush tactics that cost lives. Additionally, the region is largely Muslim, with the insurgents enjoying the support – most of it clandestine – of the local population. The truth is that the majority of northerners regard the Forças



A rare view inside a Mozambique Air Force hangar at Maputo reveals examples of the Cessna 172, PA-34 Seneca, FTB.337G Milirole and R40S Festival. Pit Weinert Collection

ambique

A guerrilla war in northern Mozambique has seen Russian private military company the Wagner Group tasked with taking the initiative from a committed jihadist force. But it has not gone well, as **Al J Venter** explains.



Armadas de Defesa de Moçambique (FADM, Mozambique Defence Armed Forces) operating in the region – largely staffed by southerners – with suspicion; in some areas populated by the Makonde tribe, the FADM is viewed with downright hostility. Similarly, they have tarred the Russian newcomers with a distinct colonial brush, many of the locals becoming vocal about having ‘foreigners’ subjugate them, as did the Portuguese before the latter were driven out in 1974. By then, Mozambique had been a Portuguese colony for almost five centuries.

A deadly conflict

In the interim there have been quite a few Russians killed. Within a week of arriving in the region early last October, seven Wagner Group mercenaries were killed in two separate incidents involving IS-linked insurgents in Mozambique’s northern Cabo Delgado province. This was followed shortly afterwards with the killing of Wagner Group soldiers in a road ambush in the region’s Macomia district. Five more Russian mercenaries were ambushed on October 27 in the region’s Muidumbe district, a reliable FADM source confirmed. According to several sources in Pemba, the biggest town in the area, four of the Russians were shot dead at the scene of one attack before being beheaded; the fifth was wounded and later died at the local Mueda district hospital. Pjotr Sauer of *The Moscow Times* described the ambush: “The attackers first set up barricades along the road, and when the FADM vehicles arrived, they began firing and then beheaded ▶

Above: A specially prepared artwork of one of the Russian-made Mi-8AMTSh ‘Hips’ (a variant exported as the Mi-171Sh) that were delivered to Mozambique to fight the jihadis in the northern Cabo Delgado region. It is armed with a B-8V pod for S-8K unguided rockets of 80mm calibre. Tom Cooper
Below: A ‘Hip’ that crashed in the embattled north of the country in April last year. The colour scheme of this helicopter seems to match those operated by Russian PMCs, although it is an older Mi-8 model assigned to the Mozambique Air Force. The circumstances of this loss are unclear. All photos Al J Venter Collection unless stated





Above: Although of poor quality, this is among only a few images showing the two former French Army Gazelles in Pemba, capital of the Cabo Delgado province, last August. The two helicopters were reportedly operated by Frontier Services Group (FSG), a private military company headquartered in Hong Kong. **Left:** A Mi-24 gunship – an earlier version of the type deployed by the Wagner Group in Mozambique. A combination of ‘Hind’ helicopter gunships and ‘Hip’ medium transporters has ensured the group’s aerial dominance, although the situation on the ground has been much more complex.

the victims and burned the vehicle.” Significantly, there was helicopter top cover available for these actions, but the dense jungle canopy limited the efficacy of the *Hinds*. Notable too, was the reluctance of the Russian Embassy in Mozambique to respond to a request from Sauer for comment, although the embassy did advise Sputnik, a Russian government news agency, that it had no knowledge of the incidents.

The man believed to be behind the Wagner Group, a strictly mercenary force (although said to include troops from Russia’s regular army) is Yevgeny Prigozhin, the former owner of a chain of hotdog stands in St Petersburg who went on to become, allegedly, chef and food taster for President Putin – to check that dishes had not been poisoned; quite a career leap for a man who had served almost a decade in jail for robbery and other offences. It has also been alleged that, under Putin’s protection, Prigozhin was awarded a string of lucrative state contracts that apparently went towards bankrolling a private army – the Wagner Group – which has so far seen action in Syria, Libya and more recently, the Central African Republic and Mozambique. With new contracts signed, it will soon also see action against Boko Haram radicals in Nigeria and Cameroon. Uganda is now also a client of the group, which will be active in unsettled areas adjoining Rwanda and the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. The origins of the Wagner Group are unclear, although it is thought that it started some years

ago as an organisation called Moran Security, which provides maritime security and other services, and it is claimed that it has since spawned numerous subsidiaries, including the Sewa Security Services, the official bodyguard of the president of the Central African Republic.

Terrorist connections

Mozambique’s jihadi insurgency – a bitter, protracted struggle in a totally undeveloped tropical region – has lasted three years so far, with the guerrilla force active in this gas-rich region now known to be linked to IS. Some of its members call themselves al-Shabaab (because of their training in Somalia), although it is known officially as Ahlu Sunna Waljama’a (ASWJ), a name often used by Sunni jihadist groups. There have been numerous similar incidents since late 2017, coinciding with a brutal terror campaign seemingly directed mainly at unarmed civilians. Gruesome photographs of mutilated and beheaded bodies have circulated on social media. The death toll of this insurgency currently stands at about a thousand, with many more injured or displaced. Islamic State has so far claimed responsibility for dozens of the attacks, which raises questions as to whether ASWJ is the local affiliate of IS. The consensus in Pemba is that this jihadist group may be claiming credit to boost its public stature, especially since the fall of its caliphate in Syria and Iraq.

As ASWJ began to make its mark, the struggle escalated sporadically, most victims being local

tribal people, the majority non-Muslims. The FADM was unable to cope, and the Maputo government asked Moscow for help, with promises of rich gas concessions in the region as recompense. It was then that Putin tasked the Wagner Group – or what the *Times* has called ‘Putin’s private army’ – with the job.

Roughly 200 Russian private military contractors – backed by several *Hind* helicopter gunships as well as a number of Mi-171Sh aircraft (which have the same performance as the Mi-8MTV, but with more sophisticated systems fitted) – first started operating along the Tanzanian frontier, and only later moved into the interior of the Cabo Delgado province. Air and ground forces were designated to operate in close co-operation with the FADM. During initial ground and air strikes, the combined forces bombed insurgent bases in several areas, pushing them into the remote interior, but the insurgents retaliated by launching attacks on several government military bases and dozens on both sides were killed. Following the arrival of the Russians, IS quickly reinforced its units in Mozambique by rushing in ‘volunteers’ from other East African countries, notably Somalia; this soon led to an intensified series of guerrilla onslaughts. As one observer commented: “The presence of Wagner created an exponential increase in incidents – it was as if someone had kicked the hornet’s nest.”

By mid-November last year, several sources in Mozambique and South Africa observed





Above: In a scene demonstrating Russian and Western interests in Mozambique, an RAF A400M Atlas C1 shares the ramp at Beira International Airport with a pair of Russian An-12 transports. The RAF airlifter was delivering 20 tonnes of aid supplies after a devastating cyclone in March last year. Crown Copyright

growing tensions between the Wagner Group and the FADM after a number of failed military operations. Joint bush patrols were halted, and it was reported in Pemba, Nacala and other northern cities that there had apparently been a breakdown in trust between Moscow's men and the FADM. It is no longer a secret that the Wagner Group regards Mozambique's military not only as inadequate, but badly trained, inefficient and unmotivated. "They are simply not up to the task at hand," said one observer who has spent time in the region. Part of the problem that only emerged recently was that many Mozambican soldiers had experienced problems being paid. The money had been dispatched northwards from Maputo, but it often seemed to go into the pockets of their officers; stuck in an isolated corner of the country 1,000 miles from the capital compounded the matter still further. Shortly afterwards, the entire Wagner Group contingent – together with all its air assets – pulled out of northern Mozambique and returned to its regional headquarters at Nacala, a large air base north of Beira, where the force had originally landed. This was followed by a security blanket dragged over the entire area by the country's state security forces, the Forças de Defesa e Segurança (FDS).

Journalists covering the story who try to enter the area are often arrested. It is not only Mozambique's security forces that are a threat to anybody getting too close to the

Russian operatives. Three Moscow journalists were murdered in the Central African Republic while undertaking investigative research into the mercenary group's Kremlin links in August 2018. Kirill Radchenko, Alexander Rastorguyev and Orkhan Dzhemal were warned by friends to desist from continuing with their inquiry. When they did not, they were killed by unknown assailants.

Nacala, the mercenary force's headquarters in Mozambique, is the biggest city in the north and while still operational, the Russians were dispersed to three military barracks, namely Macomia and Mueda in Cabo Delgado province, and the command group in the southern Nampula province. According to John Gartner, a former Rhodesian special forces operative and head of OAM International – a private military company (PMC) that originally tendered for the security contract, but lost out to the Wagner Group – Mozambique's military was not the only participant at fault; the Russians were also totally "out of their depth" in fighting jihadis, "despite being completely air dominant", he told a colleague.

Local challenges

Earlier, after the Wagner Group had arrived in East Africa, veteran African mercenary aviator Neall Ellis told the author that he doubted whether the Russians would be able to cope in Mozambique's harsh environment, in which flying is often beset by weather, bad communications

and a lack of basics like fuel, which has to be brought in overland across a region where ambushes are commonplace. The Russian force arrived with a lot of advanced military equipment that included helicopters, drones and infantry fighting vehicles, but obviously knew little of actual conditions in the field, Ellis said. The terrain in northern Mozambique presented a new set of problems, he added: "It's a totally different kind of warfare to what they've experienced in Syria or Libya." Ellis' immediate perception was that the group's commanders had done very little groundwork: "The Rovuma [river] may as well have been a new brand of toothpaste."

The main problem facing the mercenary force was that it was totally unfamiliar with what became a series of tough encounters against an enemy thoroughly familiar with conditions 'in its own backyard'. Most contacts followed ambushes laid by the insurgents in culverts or approaches to water crossings, the route taken by the Wagner Group's soldiers having been monitored from one of thousands of granite high points scattered throughout the region. Furthermore, the group's patrols could face lions and leopards on night patrols on land and a multitude of crocodiles and hippos in every river and stream, encounters with both of which result in fatalities for those ignoring basic bush-orientated disciplines.

Sources indicate that the mercenaries were equipped with an array of good East European and Chinese weapons, the majority 'fresh out



Above: A gathering of Wagner Group combatants. The origins of this mercenary force are obscure, but it's thought to be headed up by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a close associate of President Putin. **Left:** Images of Russian-operated helicopters serving in Mozambique are hard to come by. This Russian Mi-8T, registration RA-06114, was operating in the Central African Republic.



Reloading the 80mm calibre B-8 rocket pods on a Mi-24. The Wagner Group mercenaries have been provided with high-quality weapons from Chinese and East European production, as well as radio communication equipment.

of the box, as well as radio communication equipment. Also, they know how to make good use of it all. More salient, Ellis suggested, they were unlikely to get on with local folk, a largely Muslim community with a history of antagonism towards foreigners that goes back centuries. "The belligerent Makonde tribe, in particular, would regard this alien bunch of 'infidels' arriving on their patch as a rude intrusion," he declared, adding that the Makonde people (spread out on both sides of the Rovuma) gave the Portuguese Army a lot of grief when they still ruled. As for air cover, Ellis declared after the Wagner Group combatants had pulled back to Nacala: "The impression I got from some of my people who were on the ground there, was that Wagner operatives displayed little understanding how such things operate in that part of Africa." For instance, the journey from Pemba, the oil and gas port on the coast (to the immediate east of the area where much of the fighting has taken place) to the Lugenda River, a tributary of the Rovuma which forms the border with Tanzania, a distance of roughly 217 miles (350km), can

take ten to 12 hours in an SUV in the dry season and twice that when it is wet. Ellis added that as the IS insurgents were Muslim, it was not difficult to imagine where the sympathies of the local population would lie. "And that," he explained, "puts paid to any reliable intelligence likely to emerge from the jungle interior."

It is also notable that tens of thousands of people of the Islamic faith have emigrated into the region from Tanzania in recent years, a community that would clearly be opposed to any kind of "foreign military intrusion", as it was described by local news agency Carta de Moçambique. With almost no frontier controls, the insurgents are able to count on further support from friendly elements who can easily infiltrate southwards across unpatrolled rivers in small boats and pirogues. The country's vast shoreline is equally vulnerable; the navy arm of the FADM rarely patrols a coastline that extends southwards more than 1,490 miles (2,400km) from the Tanzanian border.

There are several other reasons why the Wagner Group was forced to pull back to Nacala. While the move may not be permanent

and could represent a pause for a simple reassessment of the situation before heading back into action (although satellite images suggest that all its helicopters have returned there), it did not come as a complete surprise. Earlier, the mercenary leadership had given the Maputo government notice that conditions in the north were "unsustainable", although a reliable South African source indicated that there had been serious differences between the Wagner Group's command structure and the FADM in the region. As a consequence, OAM International, the Dubai-based PMC that originally tendered for the security contract, resubmitted its application to Maputo in December.

Interestingly, both the Mozambique government and the Russians have been unusually secretive about the Wagner Group's role. For instance, while nobody could miss what the group has been doing, Maputo's defence ministry has declared that it knows nothing about the matter. Contacted by Carta de Moçambique, the ministry's spokesperson, Custódio Massingue, said it was a "novelty" to hear that the country had received Russian military support. Despite the enormous shipments of weapons and helicopters that had arrived in Nacala by sea and air.

Secretive Gazelles

Neither the Wagner Group nor OAM International are the first to have attempted to aid Mozambique in its fight against insurgents. Among those previously known to have been involved are Cape Town resident Lionel Dyke, who has been operating a PMC for several years, as well as Erik Prince, the American founder/owner of the now defunct Blackwater Group (of Iraq notoriety). One of Prince's companies, Frontier Services Group (FSG), chartered two unmarked Gazelle helicopters painted in military camouflage last August, both of which were subsequently spotted in Pemba, capital of the Cabo Delgado province. They were supplied from South Africa on a three-month trial basis by Durban-based Umbra Aviation. Having been supplanted by the Russians, Prince withdrew the helicopters in mid-September 2019.

It is interesting to note that Prince's Dubai-

Right: This giant Russian An-124 transport arrived at Nacala last September, apparently carrying Wagner combatants and their equipment, which included helicopter gunships.



From around 17 examples of the 'Hip' delivered to the Mozambique Air Force - including a Mi-8P in 1980 followed by eight Mi-8TVs from 1983 to 1987 - just two remain in service today. Pit Weinert Collection





At least two Mozambique Air Force An-26Bs were overhauled and refurbished in Kiev during 2013. Delivery of one, 1981-built example, took place in early January 2014, although it crash-landed after an engine failure during take-off in February 2015. One example remains in use at Maputo. Pit Weinert Collection

based Lancaster Six Group (L6G) private security firm had initially been in competition with the Wagner Group and Eeben Barlow's South African Specialised Tasks, Training, Equipment and Protection International (STTEPI) for security contracts in Cabo Delgado. Prince promised to eliminate the terrorists in three months in return for a share of oil and natural gas revenues. Since then, AFM has acquired details allegedly linked to the submission made by OAM International that would see the involvement of ground as well as air elements in northern Mozambique should the Wagner Group withdraw.

Comprising a comprehensive 12-page document, the proposal covers both ground and air operations envisioned to neutralise what is recognised as an efficient and highly motivated Islamic force. The 12-month contract, worth US\$35.4m, would involve a total ground and air force incorporating 166 combat personnel, of whom 100 would be selected Mozambican military qualified personnel. The main focus would be on what is termed a tactical air and ground assault unit (TGAU) with the ability to perform such operations. Other details include what are termed "required capabilities". These are:

- Specialised ground combat troops capable of operating day or night and in any weather deep inside enemy territory
- The use of fixed-wing aircraft for reconnaissance, interdiction and close

air support to ground forces

- The use of helicopters for day/night all-weather deployment and recovery of ground forces, as well as the recovery of any operational casualties
- Target acquisition, identification and destruction using ground and air assets
- Combined air and ground operations with other government forces
- The ability to transport ground forces without detection into and out of mission areas
- The collection, assimilation and dissemination of operational intelligence when and where required.

The headquarters element is detailed as a "mobile organisation and will deploy to wherever the tactical situation requires offensive operations against the enemy". Similarly, the aviation element "must be able to simultaneously deploy four teams consisting of 12 fully armed combat soldiers with aerial assets for a radius of action of 125 miles (200km) from the base of operations".

The unit's aviation element requirements are as follows:

- 1 x An-72 or An-26 transport aircraft for the transport of personnel, equipment and parachuting of men and equipment
- 1 x light aircraft (PC-6 Porter) for reconnaissance, 'sky shout' and medevac support
- 4 x MD 600N or similar light gunship helicopters for fire support and medical evacuation
- 4 x Mi-171 or UH-1 transport helicopters for the deployment of ground forces and equipment

- Qualified and operational air and ground crews in order to accomplish the required tasks.

Following the Wagner Group's losses in Mozambique (and failure to complete the anti-insurgency tasks it faced against a basic, ill-equipped guerrilla force) the word is out in Africa that the Russians are not quite the formidable combat force they like to promulgate. Consequently, some of the contracts on the table at present – Cameroon and Uganda especially – are likely to be reviewed, the former specifically, as France is powerfully opposed to a Russian military presence in one of its ex-colonies with which it maintains strong historical ties.

The most serious immediate consequence of the insurgency is that, for the first time, an enormous series of oil projects focused on the 'gas city' of Afungi in Cabo Delgado – the largest single investment on the continent – are threatened by a disparate collection of jihadists. America's ExxonMobil and France's Total met in Paris last November (with French intelligence apparently also in the picture) to discuss security plans to protect their investments. They could not find common ground to proceed. Already, ExxonMobil has put its \$US30bn natural gas project on hold, and with a seemingly impotent FADM, and the guerrillas gaining ground by the week, it doesn't seem likely to take off. Waiting in the wings are several private military companies ready to move in at short notice. But that costs money and the Maputo government is reluctant to fit the bill. **AFM**

