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Violent extremists exploit chaos in the mining sector to fuel armed violence in Cabo Delgado

- The most recent incursions by armed groups point to a reinvention of their methods of operation and organization. Extremist violence has ceased to depend solely on territorial occupation, direct attacks, and intimidation of communities, and has also begun to exploit fragile local economies to secure resources, mobility, and operational capacity. In a context marked by a weak state presence, limited oversight, and the expansion of artisanal and illegal mining, the mining sector is increasingly consolidating itself as a space vulnerable to extortion, looting, and economic appropriation by armed actors.



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What initially appeared to be isolated episodes has been taking on the contours of a broader pattern of economic adaptation by insurgent groups. In addition to the growing number of reported cases, independent analyses confirm this trend, indicating that violent extremists have intensified their presence in artisanal mining areas, while diversifying their sources of funding through extortion, kidnapping for ransom, and indirect control of

local economic activities (Bofin, 2026). Districts such as Meluco, Montepuez, and Ancuabe, where illegal mining employs thousands of people and operates largely outside state regulation, have increasingly attracted the attention of armed groups. This pattern suggests not only occasional incursions but also attempts at continuous insertion into local economic circuits through interactions with miners, demands for payments, and access to mineral resources.

Mining as a source of funding for the insurgency.

It is not necessary to go back very far in time to find records that support the idea that artisanal mining is becoming a relevant dimension of the war economy in Cabo Delgado. In 2026 alone, there are records of at least three episodes directly associated with artisanal mining areas.

- **Muaja, Ancuabe district** (March 2026): elements linked to violent extremism approached an artisanal gold mine, leading the miners to abandon the site (ACLEDD, 2026a).
- **Ravia and Muaja** (April 2026): around one hundred fighters occupied two artisanal gold mining sites in southern Cabo Delgado. In Muaja, around 80 miners were captured and held hostage, with a ransom of 50,000 meticaïis per person demanded (ACLEDD, 2026b).
- **N'naua, Ancuabe district** (June 2026): In an area associated with informal gold mining, there were reports of kidnappings, with releases reported upon payment of 10,000 meticaïis per person (ACLEDD, 2026c).

The increase in activity around mines also occurs within a specific economic context. The price of gold has broken historical records in international markets in recent years (Marmé, 2026), making artisanal mining more attractive and, simultaneously, more relevant as a potential source of funding for armed actors. The combination of resource valuation, geographical isola-

tion of mines, and weak state presence creates favorable conditions for the actions of extremist groups, who can impose payments, access minerals, or establish informal economic relationships with local operators.

The appropriation of goods, the extortion of money from miners, and the use of local resources to transport materials indicate a logic that goes beyond simple intimidation, approaching practices of economic extraction observed in other conflict areas.

In fact, studies on armed conflicts in Africa demonstrate that extremist groups and violent organizations tend to exploit local economies to generate revenue, ensure mobility, and sustain their operations. In the Sahel, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Central African Republic, activities linked to artisanal mining, informal trade, and smuggling have played a significant role in the economic support of armed actors.

Available data suggest that these groups do not need to permanently control territories or production chains to benefit economically from natural resources, since their ability to extort, tax, or interfere in economic activities carried out in contexts with a weak state presence is sufficient.

The recurrence of incidents in artisanal mining areas, combined with data pointing to increasing economic exploitation by armed groups, suggests that artisanal mining is assuming an increasingly relevant role in financing violent extremism. In fact, this represents a structural transformation in the way conflict is sustained and reproduced on the ground.

Natural Resources, Conflict, and War Economies

The relationship between natural resources and armed conflict has been extensively studied in the literature on the political economy of violence. Early debates on the so-called resource curse sought to explain why countries rich in natural resources often exhibit high levels of conflict, corruption, and institutional fragility (Auty, 1993; Ross, 2015). Subsequent studies, however, have shown that natural resources do not automatically produce violence. The determining factor lies in the quality of the institutions responsible for governing these resources and in how their benefits are distributed among different social groups (Le Billon, 2001; Collier & Hoeffler, 2004).

According to Le Billon (2001), natural resources tend to become factors of conflict when their exploitation occurs in contexts marked by political exclusion, economic inequality, and limited regulatory capacity of the State. In these circumstances, resources can become the object of competition between state actors, companies, local communities, and armed groups. Moreover, evidence from different African contexts confirms this trend.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the exploitation and commercialization of minerals such as gold, coltan, and cassiterite have been associated with the financing of armed groups and the consolidation of parallel authority structures (UN Group of Experts, 2024; Global Witness, 2022). In the Sahel, the Institute for Security Studies documented the growing involvement of extremist groups in activities linked to artisanal gold mining, extortion, and the control of local illicit economies (ISS, 2025). According to the ISS, these activities currently constitute one of the main sources of revenue generation for armed organizations in the region, allowing them to reduce their dependence on external funding.

Recent literature suggests that armed groups rarely need to directly control mines or supply chains to benefit economically from natural resources. In many cases, the strategy consists of imposing informal payments, collecting fees, extorting economic operators, or controlling trade corridors (Le Billon, 2012; ISS, 2025). In this case, access to economic flows becomes more important than formal ownership of resources.

Artisanal Mining and Subsistence Economies in Cabo Delgado

Artisanal mining currently occupies an important position in the local economies of several districts of Cabo Delgado. Although national and international attention is focused on the mega natural gas projects in the Rovuma Basin and the industrial ruby mining in Montepuez, thousands of people depend on the artisanal mining of gold, tourmalines, rubies, and other minerals to secure basic livelihoods.

Literature on artisanal mining in Africa demonstrates that this sector plays a significant role in absorbing labor in contexts characterized by high levels of poverty, unemployment, and limited capacity for formal job creation (Hilson & McQuilken, 2014; SAIIA, 2017). According to the International Labour Organization, artisanal mining constitutes one of the largest sources of rural employment in several African countries,

particularly among young people with limited opportunities for formal economic integration (ILO, 1999).

In Cabo Delgado, this reality became even clearer after the onset of violent extremism in October 2017. The conflict caused mass displacement of more than one million people, destruction of traditional economic activities, and disruption of multiple livelihoods. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the cumulative number of internally displaced persons exceeded one million during the most intense years of the conflict, particularly affecting the northern and central districts of the province (IOM, 2024).

The report "Journey to Extremism in Africa" concluded that economic factors play a significant role in recruitment trajectories for extremist

groups. Among those interviewed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), lack of economic opportunities and absence of prospects for social mobility repeatedly emerged as elements that increase vulnerability to recruitment (UNDP, 2023).

However, the report warns that poverty, by itself, does not explain adherence to extremist groups. The factor most frequently identified by respondents was the perception of exclusion, injustice, and marginalization by state institutions (UNDP, 2023). This conclusion is consistent with other literature reviews on radicalization, which highlight the importance of structural factors related to governance, institutional trust, and social inclusion (UK Government, 2015).

The province of Cabo Delgado, despite harboring some of Mozambique's most important natural resources, continues to present social and economic indicators below the national average. Studies on the conflict have documented the existence

of persistent perceptions of exclusion regarding the benefits generated by the region's natural resources, especially among young people residing in communities affected by extractive projects or located in areas rich in mineral resources (Feijó, 2020; Morier-Genoud, 2020).

Artisanal mining fits into this reality because, on the one hand, it constitutes an economic activity that offers immediate income to populations with limited alternatives for survival. On the other hand, it develops under conditions marked by informality, legal insecurity, lack of social protection, and limited state oversight (SAIIA, 2017).

Thus, while artisanal mining constitutes an important source of livelihood for thousands of young people in conflict-affected contexts, its exclusion from development policies, formalization, and governance of natural resources represents, in addition to an economic problem, a risk to human rights, stability, and the construction of sustainable peace in Cabo Delgado.

Formalizing Artisanal Mining as an Instrument for Governance, Human Rights, and Conflict Prevention

Literature on natural resource governance demonstrates that the state's capacity to regulate economic activities and ensure legitimate mechanisms for accessing resources is a central element of political stability (Le Billon, 2012; Ross, 2015). When large economic sectors remain outside formal regulatory systems, the risks of capture by criminal networks, corruption, and armed actors increase.

In this sense, formalization can contribute to improving the legal security of operators, strengthening labor protection, reducing economic exploitation by intermediaries, increasing the transparency of supply chains, and strengthening the institutional presence of the State in territories where informality predominates.

The events recorded in the districts of Ancuabe, Meluco, and Montepuez provide evidence of this vulnerability, since the attacks against artisanal mining areas did not occur in large industrial operations protected by robust security measures. They occurred in economic spaces characterized by limited state presence, reduced oversight, and high dependence of local populations on

mining activity. This reality demonstrates that vulnerability results from the combination of the presence of insurgency and the institutional weaknesses that persist in these territories.

From the perspective of the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, the formalization of artisanal mining has the potential to reduce human rights risks. The creation of formal mechanisms for licensing, monitoring, associative organization, and market access can contribute to improving working conditions, reducing situations of economic exploitation, and strengthening the capacity of communities to participate more effectively in the governance of natural resources.

However, international experience demonstrates that poorly designed formalization processes can generate new conflicts when they exclude local operators, increase barriers to entry, or favor economically more powerful actors at the expense of communities that depend on the activity (Hilson & McQuilken, 2014). Consequently, any formalization strategy in Cabo Delgado should be accompanied by mechanisms

for community participation, youth inclusion, access to financing, technical assistance, and protection of existing livelihoods.

This issue is important in a context where the reconstruction of Cabo Delgado has been linked to the return of large extractive investments and the recovery of formal economic activity. While these investments are fundamental to the province's economic growth, long-term stability will also depend on the ability to integrate the local economies that support a significant portion of the population.

International experience demonstrates that

sustainable peace rarely results solely from the military containment of armed groups. It also depends on the capacity to build legitimate institutions, expand economic opportunities, and strengthen public trust in governance structures. In Cabo Delgado, artisanal mining is situated precisely at this intersection between economy, governance, and security.

For this reason, the most important question is how to transform economic activities currently marked by informality and vulnerability into instruments of inclusion, local development, and community resilience.

Conclusion

The attacks recorded in artisanal mining areas in Cabo Delgado demonstrate that the conflict continues to adapt to the transformations in the province's political, military, and economic context. The increasing incidence of incidents in mining areas suggests that informal economic activities are gaining growing relevance in the local dynamics of insecurity and vulnerability.

The evidence does not allow us to conclude that artisanal mining constitutes a structured source of funding for the insurgency. However, it does show that these activities take place in areas exposed to extortion, looting, and interference from armed actors. It also shows that the persistence of poorly regulated informal economies continues to create opportunities for economic exploitation in conflict-affected contexts.

International literature on natural resources, war economies, and violent extremism suggests that these dynamics should not be analyzed solely from a security perspective. The vulnerability of artisanal mining areas is intimately related to broader structural factors, including poverty, youth unemployment, economic exclusion, in-

stitutional fragility, and limited state presence.

In this context, artisanal mining emerges as a central theme for the Business and Human Rights agenda in Mozambique. This is not only because it involves issues of labor, safety, and access to livelihoods, but also because it represents one of the areas where the main challenges of Cabo Delgado intersect, such as: natural resources, youth, conflict, development, and governance.

The main lesson from recent events is that the stabilization of the province will depend not only on the success of military operations or the recovery of large extractive investments, but also on the ability to integrate local subsistence economies into more inclusive, regulated, and sustainable development models.

The formalization of artisanal mining should therefore be considered a strategic priority. That is, not only as a mining management policy, but as a governance intervention capable of strengthening human rights, expanding legitimate economic opportunities, reducing vulnerabilities associated with conflict, and contributing to the construction of lasting peace in Cabo Delgado.

Recommendations

- **Gradually formalize artisanal mining in conflict-affected areas.** The Government should accelerate simplified licensing mechanisms, technical assistance, and the associative organization of artisanal miners to reduce the vulnerability of mining activities to exploitation by illicit networks and armed actors.
- **Integrating artisanal mining into strategies for preventing violent extremism.** Policies to prevent violent extremism should recognize artisanal mining as an important source of livelihood for thousands of young people and incorporate measures for economic inclusion, opportunity creation, and strengthening community resilience.
- **Strengthen due diligence on human rights in the extractive sector.** Companies operating in Cabo Delgado should adopt enhanced human rights due diligence mechanisms, in accordance with the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, considering the risks associated with conflict-affected contexts.
- **Strengthen local governance of natural resources.** Public authorities should strengthen their institutional presence, oversight, and community participation mechanisms in mining areas to promote greater transparency and trust in the management of natural resources.
- **Promoting economic opportunities for young people.** Reconstruction and development programs in Cabo Delgado should prioritize youth employment, vocational training, and access to sustainable livelihoods to reduce structural factors of exclusion identified in the literature as increasing vulnerability to recruitment by armed groups.
- **To produce evidence on artisanal mining and conflict.** There is a significant knowledge gap regarding the relationship between artisanal mining, illicit economies, and violent extremism in Cabo Delgado. Further evidence gathering is needed to support data-driven public policies.

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