In Northern Mozambique, violence is a deadly ally of HIV

**Cabo Delgado, the province in the north-east of Mozambique, has been suffering from violent attacks and clashes between armed groups and government forces since 2017. The consequences are felt by everyone, including the thousands of people living with HIV. For them, getting their live-saving care has become next to impossible. In Mozambique, around 12 per cent of the population lives with HIV.**

While close to 630,000 people remain displaced by the ongoing conflict in Cabo Delgado, northern Mozambique, over 540,000 people previously displaced have returned to their areas of origin[[1]](#footnote-1). Those returning to their villages are usually confronted with total destruction, and their needs can be quite similar to those who remain displaced. The security situation remains volatile in Cabo Delgado.

People with HIV can lead a normal and healthy if they take the right HIV medication. Interrupting that treatment is dangerous, explains Phillomina Kuvheya, the medical coordinator of MSF in the town of Macomia in Cabo Delgado. “When people stop taking their pills, their immune system weakens, and they start developing other diseases.Violence is having a significant impact on mental health on all families touched by this conflict, but people living with HIV can experience even more stress and anxiety as accessing medication and healthcare is critical for them.”

The continuity of the treatment is key, but this has become immensely difficult. The attacks in this conflict are very violent, and often also very sudden. When they must run for their lives, people rarely can do so with a stock of HIV drugs. “I had to flee in a rush. I didn’t have anything with me, only my baby and the clothes we were wearing. I didn’t know where my husband and our other children had gone. And I did not have enough HIV medication with me,” says Maria\*, a 43-year-old farmer from Macomia.

The search for drugs is further complicated because the conflict has also destroyed much of the healthcare system. Until 2017, the government was running seven health posts in the district of Macomia. Today, only one is still functioning. As a result, people may have to travel very far for their treatment. MSF is currently running three clinics in Macomia Village and is also providing support in HIV testing and treatment, including on the prevention of vertical transmission of HIV for pregnant women (from mother to child). Previously, MSF used to run mobile clinics in remote areas of the district, but since June the mobile clinics have been suspended due to insecurity.

“When my wife Sofia got very sick with HIV, we were displaced and we were too far from the clinic to go there,” says Constancio, a 43-year-old carpenter. “It was over five hours walking, but my wife was too weak to walk. We could also take a motorbike, but we did not have enough money.” It was impossible for Sofia to access healthcare services, and eventually she succumbed to the consequences of HIV.

Given these enormous hurdles, recurrent displacement, and destruction of healthcare facilities, it is challenging not only for HIV patients to access treatment, but also to monitor their health and needs. Many are likely to have dropped treatment there . Before the conflict started, 6,000 people in Macomia District took HIV medication. Today, only about a thousand are known to be still on treatment. No one knows what happened to the other 5,000 patients, and this is only one of 16 districts in Cabo Delgado. There’s no doubt that many of them have died; others may be very sick right now. As the treatment suppresses the virus rather than killing it, people need to keep taking their medication forever. If not, the disease will emerge.

“Sometimes people with HIV come to our clinical in a critical condition, with advanced forms of HIV. We refer them to the hospital in Pemba, the provincial capital. But most of these patients pass away. Advanced HIV disease is among the leading mortality causes for our patients here,” says Phillomina Kuvheya.

In addition to this, in Cabo Delgado, communities and patients suffer the impact of stigma and discrimination to HIV. In some occasions, there is even self-discrimination caused by lack of access to information. Additional efforts need to be put into practice to break stigma, taboos, and discrimination around HIV. Fear of stigma and discrimination is also one of the reasons leading patients to drop treatment and interrupt treatment.

People living with HIV in conflict zones face very specific and enormous challenges. If these aren’t overcome, the consequences are deadly. Yet there’s barely any guidance for governments or aid organisations on how to better support these people. On World Aids Day, MSF asks that the needs of this very vulnerable group are made a priority in the ongoing fight against HIV and aids.

\* *Maria is an alias*

1. [IOM/DTM Mozambique: Mobility Tracking Assessment Report 19 – August 2023](https://dtm.iom.int/reports/mozambique-mobility-tracking-assessment-report-19-august-2023?close=true) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)