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Attack against Russian ship: Mozambican navy promised to send helicopters for rescue, but they never arrived

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Exclusive! The Centre for Public Integrity (CIP) reveals new the details, of the recent armed attack against a Russian ship that was undertaking research into the fishery resources off the coast of Cabo Delgado. The ship's crew asked for help from the Mozambican navy, which promised to send two helicopters, but these never arrived. The researchers accuse the Ministry of Defence and the National Maritime Institute (INAMAR) of negligence because they did not issue an alert about a possible attack in that region, even after requesting an opinion about the expedition.



Caption: Image of the Russian ship attacked on May 10

A scenario of terror on the high seas... a terrifying chase! The Centre for Public Integrity has obtained exclusively audiovisual accounts of the recent armed attack against a Russian ship carrying out research off the coast of Cabo Delgado. João (not his real name) is a researcher and was one of a team of more than 40 occupants of the ship which undertook a 50 days fisheries research trip which began in Ponta de Ouro, in Maputo province and continued northwards to Cabo Delgado. The ship was halted, analysing the environmental parameters of the water, near the Quirimbas archipelago, when the crew – which was in a cabin located in a high point of the ship – noted the approach of a boat, at around 15.00 on 10 May.

Initially, the team did not suspect that these were attackers “because we had received information that there would be a military patrol in that area”. However, matters changed when the team noted the characteristics of the occupants of the boat. “They were people who seemed to be children, youths and adults dressed in casual clothes, but with masks, guns and machetes, and they were communicating in Arabic”, João said.



Caption: Image of the attackers chasing the Russian vessel

Attacker had one of the researchers in his sights, but did not fire

The approach of the boat made the Russian crew nervous, and they quickly warned the occupants who were in the laboratories and other compartments of the research ship. One of the researchers was about ten metres from the attackers and saw one of them point a gun at him. It was this that warned the other occupants, mostly Russians, who were on the deck of the vessel, about the danger. After the researcher spoke with the other occupants, and began the escape, the attackers started shooting. From the bullet holes, the ship's occupants have no doubt that the attackers were shooting to kill. It was just a matter of luck that none of the occupants was hit.

Video shows moment when a projectile almost hit members of the Russian crew

In dire straits, the crew began an attempt to throw off the attackers by moving the vessel further out to the high seas. The moments that followed were ones of total panic, because the ship took some time to gain speed. A video from the ship's internal circuit shows the crew's concern to control the movement of the attackers who were now in two boats. A bullet entered the cabin and hit a monitor screen. It came close to wounding or killing one of the four Russians in the room.



Caption: Evidence of puncture wounds caused by bullets fired by the attackers



Another video shows the attackers chasing the ship while continuing to shoot, even at the risk of causing a shipwreck. "They were in speedboats and showed that they were willing to immobilise the ship. They fired several shots to damage the ship", recalled João.

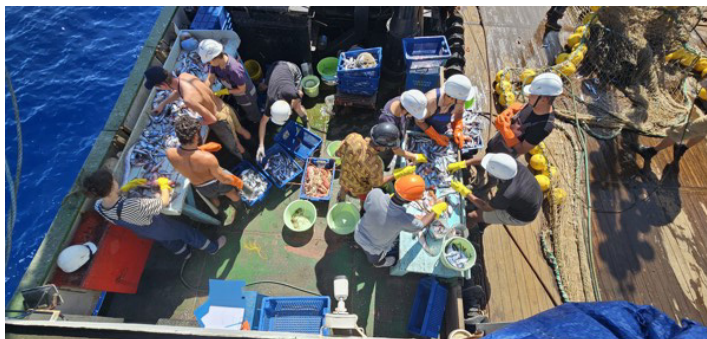
Navy promised rescue through two helicopters which never arrived

During the escape, the crew asked the Mozambican navy for assistance. "We rang the Cabo Delgado navy captain who promised to send two helicopters, but that aid did not arrive". But the attackers seemed determined to stop the ship, in a ceaseless pursuit that lasted for about 20 minutes. According to João, the attackers gave up the chase, because of the rough seas, which posed a risk of shipwreck.

Even with the attackers apparently giving up, fear persisted. The night that followed was one of terror. “Nobody slept. We were all nervous because we did not know whether they had the capacity to locate us. So the crew decided to switch off the radar so that the ship would not be identified. This device was only switched on to control nearby vessels. We only felt calm when we left the Pemba area”, he recalled.

The satellite image below shows the ship escaping. Nearby there were other vessels, marked in green, but none of them responded to the request for help.

The team’s great frustration concerns the defence and security authorities. “They promised to send two helicopters to help but they did not arrive. On the morning of the following day, we began to receive calls from the captain asking for our location. Up to today, we don’t understand why we were abandoned. They allege they didn’t send help because our ship was not visible on the radar, but they could have contacted us in the same way that we contacted them”, said Joao sadly.



Caption: Research team in full swing on the high seas



Caption: Image shows the vessel’s movements before the attack and the ship fleeing to the high seas

The accusation of negligence...

The research team accuses the National Maritime Institute (*INAMAR*) and the Ministry of Defence of negligence. It says that these two bodies were consulted about the route that would be followed by the researchers, but they did not warn the team about any risk of attack in that zone. Faced with these facts, the team can only find one explanation: “We think our Government was negligent”.

More than 10 days after the attack: the Government says it has no details on the episode

Ten days passed between the date of the attack and the first reaction of the Council of Ministers, but even so the Government said it had no relevant information about what happened off the coast of Cabo Delgado. The government spokesperson, Inocêncio Impissa, the Minister of State Administration, said the situation was still being investigated.

CIP has learnt that a team from the Navy questioned the researchers and the ship’s crew on 17 May, the date of their arrival in Maputo.

Interviewed by STV, a representative of the Russian Embassy in Mozambique confirmed the attack and guaranteed that the research team completed its work successfully. This version contradicts that of the research team who said there were still two points they did not visit.

It is suspected that the attackers came from one of the islands (Tambuzi or Vamizi), near the site of the attack, since Mocimboa da Praia is behind them and hence further away. Joao believes that the attackers may have suspected that the ship had broken down since, given the nature of its work, the ship goes backwards and forwards, sometimes stopping.

CIP asks for information on the attack from the Defence Ministry and from INAMAR

Under the Freedom of Information law, the Centre for Public Integrity has sent letters to the Defence Ministry and to INAMAR with the following questions:

1. Was there any negligence by the Defence Ministry and INAMAR in this case?
2. What actions were taken to rescue the research team?
3. What is being done to ascertain the circumstances of the event and to prevent future episodes?
4. Is there any aerial equipment for rescue operations on the high sea?
5. What is the response time for search and rescue situations?

By the time we closed this text, we had not received any response from either of the two bodies.

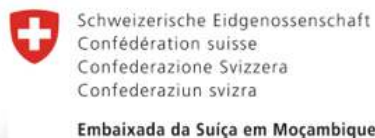


Caption: Some bullets found inside the vessel

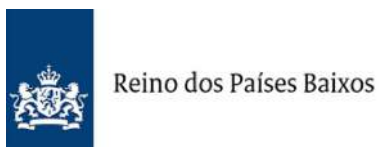


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