

# Conflict, kidnappings threaten Mozambique tourism

MAPUTO: A spate of kidnappings and low-intensity conflict with troubling echoes of Mozambique's civil war are threatening to scare away tourists who normally flock to the country's palm-fringed beaches.



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Around this time of year hoteliers, tour operators and shop owners at Mozambique's Indian Ocean resort towns are usually busy preparing for a deluge of holidaymakers.

White-sand beaches, pristine coral reefs and luxury hideaways draw travellers from neighbouring South Africa, the continent's economic powerhouse and from farther afield for the southern hemisphere's summer holidays.

After more than two decades of peace, just over two million tourists now visit Mozambique each year, accounting for six percent of the economy in 2012.

But in recent weeks clashes have intensified between fighters from revived rebel group Renamo and the army in the centre of the country. It is the worst violence since Mozambique's brutal civil war ended in 1992.

## Resorts mostly south of conflict zone

Most resorts are clustered south of the conflict zone, but military skirmishes and attacks on cars travelling along a 100km stretch of highway south of the central city of Beira have spooked many.

"Everybody is concerned. Everybody is asking us and we are telling them we sit and wait," said Boet Boshoff, who runs a lodge just south of the restive area. At least two passenger buses have been set alight, and passengers and truck drivers have been shot at.

The attacks have been attributed to Renamo, a Cold War-era anti-communist force that became an opposition party after the civil war but regrouped armed fighters at a nearby base a year ago.

Security convoys with military escorts have done little to ease concern, and locals are starting to feel the pinch. "Tourists are few, very few. They are scared," said Issuf Maarise, who owns a truck stop near where several skirmishes have taken place.

"They shoot. These guys don't care. The army from Mozambique, they just run away," he said.

South African businessman Bhekisisa Dhlamini was one of those who dared to travel to the region. Last week his convoy was attacked and he was seriously wounded. "His rib is broken and his arm is broken from two bullets. He is very lucky because the car is finished, there are about 20 bullets in the car," said his wife Sandra Cumbi.

Four others were also wounded in the ambush, according to local reports.

## Government raids Renamo bases

The government has gone on the offensive, raiding Renamo bases and doing everything it can to assure tourists and foreign investors that the situation is in hand.

But memories are fresh of the 16-year civil war, which killed about a million people and crippled the economy.



Pristine beaches and a tropical climate make Mozambique a holidaymaker's paradise. Image: [Mozambique](#)

After hearing of the recent fighting, many who had paid deposits for December and January are trying to transfer their bookings to next year.

"Naturally clients are fearful but, as they have already paid, they don't want to lose their money," national tourism director Martinho Muabiwa told AFP. "We have little time," he added.

The tourists most affected are those travelling from neighbouring Zimbabwe or Malawi.

Maria Malepa, who lives in Soweto, South Africa, made an overland trip from Zimbabwe's Victoria Falls down through the danger zone without knowing the risk her family was taking. They realised the tensions once they joined the military escort.

"All of a sudden there was racing - trucks and taxis were racing so as not to be left behind and shot," she said. "At a truck stop we spoke to another truck driver who had bullet holes on the door," Malepa told AFP. "If we knew I could have turned away where that convoy started."

The French and British embassies have issued travel warnings, and cross-border bus services are considering suspending the services.

Analysts downplay the likelihood of a return to full-scale conflict, but operators like Boshoff are increasingly worried the incidents will frighten away tourists. "If it carries on like it is now we don't advise them to come at all," he said.

A spate of ransom kidnappings has also left locals and expatriates anxious about their safety. The authorities say at least 14 people - mostly wealthy Mozambicans of Asian origin - were kidnapped between 2011 and 2012.

But abductions restarted in recent months and have targeted the children of wealthy local families and foreigners too.

Anglo-Australian mining company Rio Tinto said earlier this month it has asked the families of its foreign employees to leave Mozambique as a precaution.

Source: AFP via I-Net Bridge

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