PROTECTION ALERT

Minheuene Locality Attack, Ancuabe District

Cabo Delgado Province, Mozambique

1. CONTEXT AND INCIDENT PROFILE

This protection alert summarizes findings from field visits and community engagement conducted in affected areas on 04 May 2026.

An armed group conducted a multi-site attack across Minheuene Locality, Ancuabe District, moving sequentially through the aldeias of Muaja, Nacole, and Minheuene Sede over approximately 13 hours. The attack against civilians combined looting, arson, kidnapping, sexual violence, and the systematic destruction of civilian infrastructure, indicating deliberate harm rather than opportunistic raiding.

According to members of the affected communities, the armed group's profile was predominantly composed of young males, reportedly equipped with heavy weaponry, some of which they used to burn larger infrastructure such as the Catholic Mission buildings in Minheuene.

2. CHRONOLOGICAL SEQUENCE OF EVENTS

Muaja

The attack was initiated in Muaja through looting. Nineteen people, including 10 women, were kidnapped from a vehicle traveling toward the fields in the outskirts of the village (*machambas*). All were released the same day and reported no violence. No houses were burned. The group did not remain in Muaja for long and moved toward Nacole after approximately one hour.

Nacole

In Nacole, the group burned a small church and one house, vandalized a local market, and fired gunshots during movement. Gunfire was heard across the surrounding villages all the way to Minheuene, as the group allegedly shot several times through the air as a warning of their presence. The group departed for MinheueneSede around 13h00.

Minheuene Sede

Upon arrival in Minheuene, 22 individuals were kidnapped, a mixed group of men, women, teenagers, and young girls and boys. The group seemed to aim particularly the Catholic mission in Minheuene Sede; but made their way through the village terrorizing villagers, looting phones and belongings, taking all the livestock they could find and burning some houses and market stalls. At approximately 14h00, the group of kidnapped individuals were taken inside the church where they were held for many hours. Though majority of the community declared there was no violence involved against civilians, there are reports of sexual violence and two mildly injured men (one victim of a stray bullet and the other, victim of a simple altercation). The church was burned between 18h00 and 20h00. In parallel, 10 houses were burned and fourteen market stalls destroyed. The local health center, the main one for the entire region, was also vandalized and all stock of medicine stolen.

Reports were also received about people with physical disabilities unable to flee and being forcibly dragged out of their houses by the armed group, only to watch it being looted, vandalized and burned. As result, many victims of the kidnapping and attacks were identified as experiencing severe trauma.

The group ate and took food stocks from the community before departing around 22h00. The majority of the community fled during the afternoon towards Nanjua, Meza, Namanhumbiri and Nanhupo, while others reported to have spent the night in the bush. Many families separated during the flight, with some older persons and persons with disabilities being left behind and children getting lost from their families.

It is unclear where the armed group was heading after the attacks in Minheuene. Some say they went to Namanhumbiri, while others say Inseue. However, no sightings of the group have been reported in either of these locations, making locals believe they may be still hiding in the area.

3. DISPLACEMENT PATTERNS

The attacks were concentrated in Minheuene Locality, which includes the villages of Nacole, Muaja, and Minheuene Sede, and caused **significant displacement within Ancuabe District, particularly into areas adjacent to the targeted villages.** While local authorities are consolidating population statistics, they reported that over 2,000 households have been affected by the attacks. As of 04 May, displacement had concentrated in three main locations: Nanjua A and B (the largest caseload), Muaja (which was itself affected but now hosts displaced persons from Minheuene Sede), and Meza neighborhoods (Milamba 1, 2, and others). **Reports indicate that smaller groups also fled to Namanhumbiri in Montepuez District but are believed to have returned in the days following the attack**. Host communities in Meza and Nanjua have been absorbing arrivals, and community generosity has been the primary response mechanism to date. Security incidents in Meza locality continue to be reported and are pending verification.

Patterns of movement remain fluid. Many displaced persons have made temporary daytime returns to Minheuene to collect food and belongings but do not spend the night. Several community members stated they do not intend to return permanently due to fear of new attacks. Economic pressure, particularly the lack of shelter and livelihood support in displacement locations, is expected to drive **returns, even if security remains fragile.**

4. PROTECTION CONCERNS AND ANALYSIS

Characteristic of the attacks

Community members interviewed in Nanjua expressed a strong perception that the attack was a warning, a deliberate signal rather than a terminal event. As of 5 May, new attacks have indeed been reported in the same area. They noted that although crops had been harvested and much of the grain stock was present in the area, the group prioritized taking livestock, phones, bags, and wallets over food stocks. This selectivity, combined with the targeted destruction of specific households and both churches, reinforces the assessment that the group operated with local intelligence and deliberate objectives.

In addition to the attacks by NSAG, secondary looting or vandalism was also reported, allegedly committed by some opportunistic individuals from local communities, further amplifying losses beyond what the NSAG itself caused.

The attacks produced the following severe and layered protection harm across the affected population.

Sexual and gender-based violence. There are reports of sexual violence perpetrated against women and girls. Disclosure barriers, stigma, fear of family rejection, and absence of confidential reporting channels, mean reported figures likely undercount actual harm. GBV services must be urgently supported in all displacement locations.

Family separation. Interviewees in Nanjua confirmed that families were separated during the flight. Adults fled in different directions and at different times, particularly at night. State security forces along the route reportedly directed unaccompanied children to the local police post, where parents were advised to collect them. While this suggests an improvised child protection response, there are currently no reports of children left unaccompanied or separated in either displacement site or in the areas of return assessed.

Violence against children. Children and teenagers were among those held, exposed to sexual violence, arson, and forced religious coercion. Their psychosocial needs require specific assessment distinct from adult case management.

Persons with disabilities, elderly, and those with acute medical needs left behind. Many persons with disabilities, elderly individuals, and those with acute medical needs faced the attack and its aftermath at the gravest scale, as they were unable to escape. Three individuals with severe physical disabilities could not evacuate; their survival depended on an arbitrary decision by NSAG members to remove them before the house was set on fire, resulting in severe trauma.

Civil documentation. Many individuals fled without identity documents, either because their documents were destroyed when houses burned, looted or because they had never held them. Documentation loss has been cited as a primary concern in the aftermath of the attacks, given the constraints on freedom of movement, especially while military operations are ongoing. The absence of civil documentation exacerbates protection risks. For elderly persons, PWD, women, who may never have held individual documents, this barrier is disproportionate and amplifies every other protection risk they face during displacement.

Risks associated to premature returns: As of the assessment date, many of the displaced persons are making temporary daytime returns to collect food, retrieve belongings, and secure remaining assets, but are not spending the night in areas of return. Others have reluctantly returned but declared that they did so out of lack of options. This pattern is expected to intensify given the lack of livelihoods support and formal assistance in displacement locations, where economic pressure rises while host communities' absorption capacity becomes feeble. The risk of a premature pull effect to still insecure areas, driven by needs rather than improved safety conditions, requires active monitoring. There is no confirmed information that the armed group has withdrawn from the area, and security incidents in the broader area continue to be reported pending verification. Humanitarian partners should avoid any action or communication that could be interpreted as signaling that return is safe or supported until further information is obtained.

Background and Methodological Note: The present protection alert is based on summarized findings from a rapid protection assessment (RPA) conducted on 04 May 2026 by a joint mission composed of UNHCR, AVSI and GCR. The RPA covered a total of 5 villages, including Minheuene, Nacole, Muaja, Meza-sede and Nanjua. A total of 22 key informant interviews, 4 semi-structured group discussions and a few household interviews were conducted, including discussions with local authorities from the Administrative Post of Meza and relevant localities, members of affected communities and host population.

For further information, please contact UNHCR at mozmaprotection@unhcr.org.