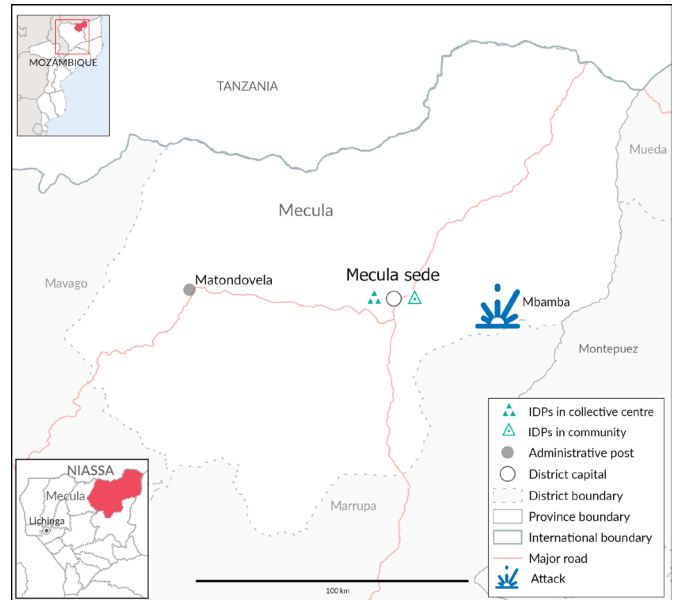


CONTEXT

On **29 April 2025**, non-state armed groups (NSAGs) launched attacks on **Mbamba village**, Niassa province, prompting the forced displacement of its residents. While some fled into the bush, others began a long journey on foot towards the neighbouring village of **Macalange**. Traumatized by an attack in **December 2021**¹, during which gunfire was opened on them, and their homes were burned, the population of **Macalange**, seeing the new influx from Mbamba, also fled to **Mecula town** together with them. The attacks and rising fears of violence triggered the displacement of approximately 2,085 individuals (511 households), as of 1 May 2025. On the ground, on 9 May, community leaders estimated the number families present in Mecula town at 516. Around 400 families are currently staying in the 16 June Primary School sharing 06 classrooms, while the remaining 116 families are being hosted by host communities (often with their relatives).

On 9 May 2025, UNHCR, with the support of Girl Child Rights (GCR), conducted a Rapid Protection Assessment at the 16 June Primary School. Recognizing the presence of IDPs residing within host communities, UNHCR staff also engaged with them directly, gathering firsthand information about their situation. **25 key informants (KIs)** were interviewed, all IDPs, and **five focus group discussions (FGDs)** held separately with different demographic groups, including adult women (ages 18–60), adult men, and young people, allowing for gender- and age-specific perspectives to emerge.

Mecula district, Niassa – Displacement area



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.
Creation date: 13 May 2025. Sources: UNHCR Pemba, CENACARTA, IOM. Feedback: hilgert@unhcr.org / viancuti@unhcr.org



Displaced persons at 16 June Primary School in Mecula town, Mecula district. ©Deilany Souza/UNHCR/9 May 2025.

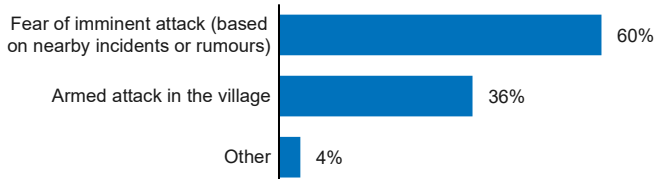
¹ UNHCR, [Protection Monitoring and Response: Mecula District, Niassa Province](#), 20 December 2021.

² IOM-DTM, [Movement Alert 133](#), 5 May 2025.

PROTECTION INCIDENTS DURING THE ATTACK AND WHILE FLEEING

- As illustrated in the chart, while 36% of key informants stated that people left as the result of an actual armed attack (mainly from Mbamba), 60% reported that people fled due to fear of an imminent attack.
- The displacement from Macalange was primarily preventive, driven by the memory of a previous attack carried out by NSAGs in 2021, which had destroyed the village. Half of IDPs in Mecula have already fled two times.

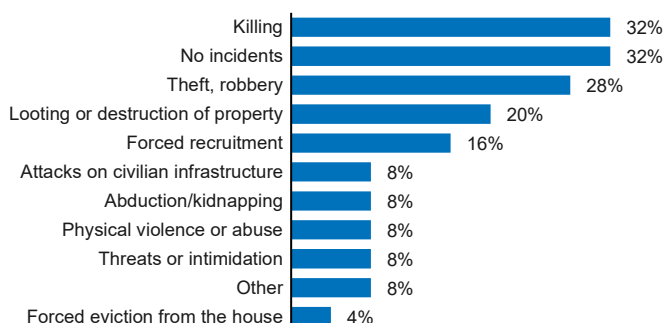
Main reason for flight



In the place of origin:

- The chart highlights the contrasting realities faced by the two communities interviewed. While Mbamba was severely affected by violent incidents, most notably killings as reported above, Macalange experienced no such incidents.
- Delving deeper into protection concerns, women from Mbamba reported witnessing extreme brutality, including decapitations and the killing of community members. There was widespread looting of food crops, which were ready for harvest at the time. Amid the chaos, several individuals, both men and women were abducted and remain missing.

Protection incidents in place of origin before fleeing



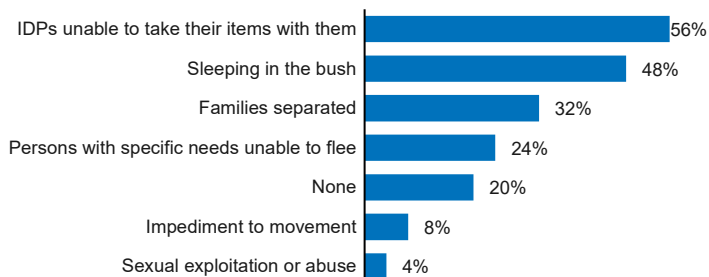
"During the attack, my young nephew, who was working as a security guard, was abducted by armed men. I don't know if he is alive or dead, and this uncertainty causes me great distress. His mother passed away, and I am now responsible for him."

(displaced woman)

During the flight:

- IDPs from both communities, including those who fled preventively, reported that they were unable to collect their belongings, a situation reflected by more than half of respondents. Some explained that they were working in their *machambas* (fields) when the attacks occurred, forcing them to begin their arduous journey on foot from remote locations through the bush.
- Sleeping in the bush was reported by half of respondents, highlighting the harsh conditions IDPs endured. Many did not stop walking until they reached a safer area. IDPs from Mbamba mentioned walking through the night and arriving in Macalange only around 5 a.m.
- Persons with specific needs were significantly affected by the attack according to 24% of respondents. Behind this figure lies a deeply painful reality: family members recounted the heartbreak of having to leave behind blind and elderly relatives who were unable to flee due to their physical limitations.

Situations encountered during flight



"At times, the children were so exhausted from walking that they had to crawl for a while before they could stand up and continue on foot."

(elderly IDP)

PROTECTION NEEDS AND RISKS IN AREA OF DISPLACEMENT

Protection risks:

- **Elderly persons and persons with disabilities** face heightened protection risks, including social isolation, neglect, emotional distress, and lack of access to basic services. During community consultations, the absence of essential services and adequate shelter for these groups emerged as a primary concern. Nine days after displacement, they remained without support, still sleeping on the ground in unsafe and undignified conditions. The situation is particularly alarming, as very few elderly individuals and persons with disabilities were able to reach safety, due to limited mobility and the challenges of fleeing under distress. Many elderly women are also acting as primary caregivers for their grandchildren, as their sons and daughters remain missing.
- **Women and girls** face elevated risks, with gender-based violence (GBV) emerging as one of the primary protection concerns. Reported forms of GBV include sexual violence and psychological abuse. Women expressed a strong sense of vulnerability linked to poor lighting, overcrowded sleeping arrangements, and the lack of separation between men and women, factors that significantly increase the risk of violence, particularly at night. Women disclosed incidents of sexual violence within the accommodation centre. One woman recounted an incident that occurred shortly after her arrival at a school shelter:

"One night, a man came to my spot intending to sleep with me without my consent. This happened a week after I arrived here."

(displaced woman)

- **Family separation** is another critical concern. Several IDPs reported not knowing the whereabouts of family members. During a focus group discussion with eight women, three said they had no information about their daughters. Unaccompanied or separated **children** were also identified among the communities. One woman shared:

"When the attack happened, I fled with my two grandsons to Macalange. I have not seen my daughter since."

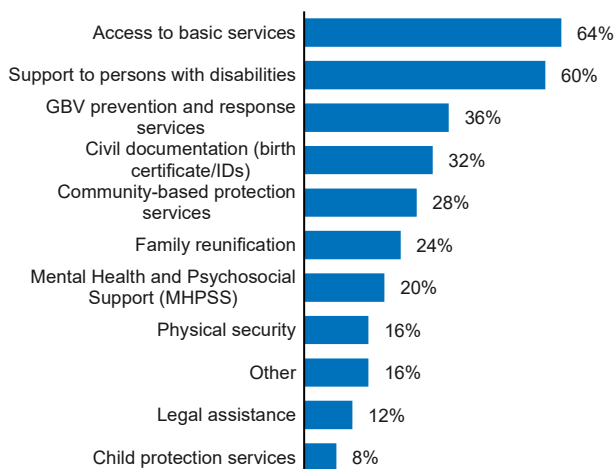
(displaced woman)

- IDPs living in host communities feel neglected when it comes to humanitarian assistance. They mentioned that only the school is prioritized in distributions. This situation is creating some tensions between the two communities.
- Issues related to the **lack of civil documentation** are a critical concern for the IDPs. Some participants reported losing their identification documents during their hurried escape, which may hinder their ability to access essential services, navigate legal procedures and, more importantly, move freely in a conflict zone.

Protection needs:

- In light of the above, the protection needs of the displaced population are both urgent and multifaceted.
- The most mentioned need is access to basic services, such as healthcare, shelter, NFIs, lighting and food. IDP children are also in need of access to education.
- Key protection needs also identified during the discussions were support for persons with disabilities, gender-based violence (GBV) prevention and response, access to civil documentation, community-based protection services, family reunification, and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS). Physical security is also being requested by the communities.

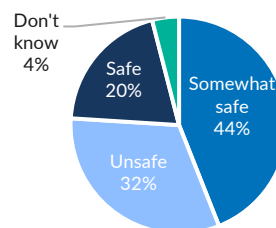
Main protection needs in the area of displacement



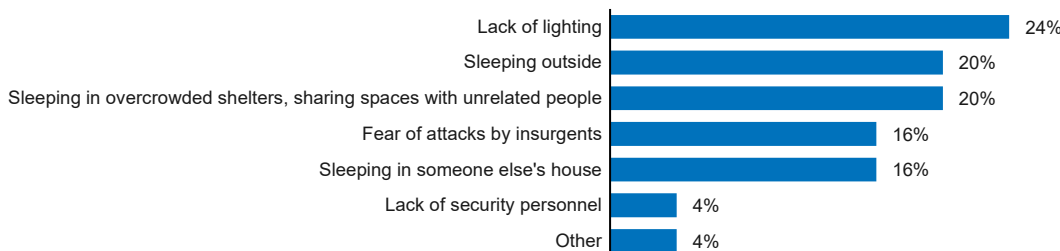
Perception of safety in area of displacement:

- For the one-third of respondents who reported that IDPs are feeling unsafe, the primary concerns included the lack of lighting, as well as sleeping outdoors or in overcrowded shelters. Women emphasized the absence of lighting, and the risks associated with sharing spaces with unrelated men—factors that significantly contribute to the perception of insecurity within displacement settings.

Do people feel safe where they are staying now?



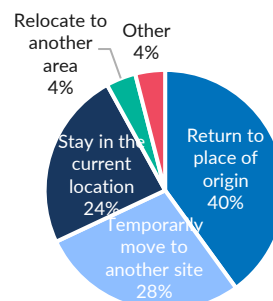
If not, what makes them feel unsafe?



Future intentions:

- Although 40% of respondents believe the displaced want to return eventually to their places of origin, none have done so yet permanently. Some men make daytime visits to their villages to collect remaining food supplies, but the broader community has no plans to return in the short term due to ongoing insecurity and lingering trauma.
- Among the 28% of respondents who expressed willingness to be relocated, this preference was primarily driven by the poor living conditions at the current site. In focus group discussions, IDPs emphasized the impact of severe overcrowding in classrooms and inadequate shelter arrangements as key factors influencing their desire to relocate.
- While 24% of respondents reported IDPs intend to stay in the current location, with school classes set to resume on 19 May, the facility currently serving as a shelter must be vacated to accommodate students.

Intentions for the future



ONGOING ACTIVITIES

As of 9 May, UNHCR has already started to respond on the ground:

- GBV and PSEA awareness raising was conducted with the in the school.
- Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) were provided to displaced women.
- 25 NFI kits were distributed, in coordination with Social Action, to the most vulnerable groups, as well as some tarpaulins to cover the ground in the school. The distribution aimed to mitigate protection risks by prioritizing the most vulnerable who face heightened exposure to exploitation, neglect, and gender-based violence due to the lack of basic items.

Other partners:

- The government supported with hot meals and some mobile health services.
- Girl Child Rights (GCR) conducted awareness raising on GBV and referral of cases.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Urgent decongestion of the 16 June Primary School: Currently the school is hosting 400 families in six (06) classrooms. Not only the school needs to be vacated to be able to resume educational activities, but also most of the protection risks are associated with lack of privacy, insufficient lighting and linked to the inappropriate living conditions. As a result, the first priority is to support the authorities for immediate decongestion of school premises through identification of alternative options, primary in host communities, as IDP sites should be the last resort. One fifth of the IDPs are currently already hosted in host communities, mainly together with their relatives. Authorities should also be supported to ensure that any relocation is carried out in consultation with the community, and that it preserves family unity.

Mitigate protection risks in the short term: While still in the school pending relocation elsewhere, urgent protection mitigation measures should be put in place.

- **Mitigate GBV and protection risks in the overcrowded classrooms:** Provide adequate lighting, including in the latrines, and hygiene facilities to enhance privacy. Currently, there are only two latrines being used by the whole population (around 2,000). Establish temporary women-friendly spaces while deploying GBV staff to offer confidential support and referrals.
- **Enhance child protection:** Identify unaccompanied and separated children and ensure referrals to Accão Social (Social Action) for family tracing and reunification. Taking into consideration that half of the population are children living in an overcrowded setting, child-friendly spaces and awareness among parents and caregivers on positive coping mechanisms are essential. Advocacy for accessible channels for children to access education in Mecula, as the schools are supposed to reopen on 19 May.
- **Provide mental health and psychosocial support:** An important number of IDPs have lived or witnessed events during the attacks, the flight and now in displacement that have created emotional distress. It would be urgent to capacitate outreach workers and community focal points to deliver basic psychological first aid to individuals in distress, including children, older persons, and persons with disabilities, in both host communities and accommodation centres. In light of the limited presence of specialized services in remote areas such as Mecula, efforts should focus on strengthening the capacity of locally trusted members who are also able to communicate in local languages with the IDPs.
- **Establishment of a temporary protection desk:** Identification of and provision of protection training to IDPs and host community members, in partnership with Accão Social, to support as community volunteers. They will contribute to the identification of protection concerns, facilitate referrals, conduct awareness-raising sessions, monitor early signs of tensions with the communities, and assist in complaints and feedback mechanisms. Strengthening community engagement in these areas will enhance localized protection responses and promote social cohesion.
- **Mapping of available services:** Ensure that all the services provided by the government and humanitarian actors are mapped and shared with the affected communities.

Support access to protection in the medium term:

- **Facilitate access to civil documentation:** Most of the IDPs have reported having left their homes without the opportunity to take their belongings, and as a result a number of them have fled without their documents, which is impacting their capacity to move freely, as well as to access assistance and services. Support Niassa's Provincial Service for Justice and Labour (SPJT) and Province Service for Civil Identification (SPDI) in issuing/reissuing IDs, prioritizing women, youth, and unaccompanied or separated children to facilitate access to assistance, services and movement.
- **Ensure informed decision on return:** Around 40% of the IDPs intend to return to their village of origin once the situation allows, especially the security reestablished. To ensure sustainability of return, population will need to be maintained informed of the evolution of the situation, in order to be able to decide freely when the right moment has come for them and their families to return..