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**The Massacre at Wiriamu**

On December 16, 1972, a young captain of the Portuguese Army in the overseas province of Mozambique was summoned to the local army headquarters in the northwestern district of Tete.



*Alouette Helicopter, Portuguese Air Force*

He received orders to take command of Operation Marosca, whose aim was to eradicate the rebels from the five villages in the Wiriamu region.

At least 385 identified civilians lost their lives in the subsequent attack, although the true figure is undoubtedly greater.

News of this outrage would never have been publicised but for the actions of the priests who smuggled reports out of Mozambique, and for the journalists who verified their accounts.

Two hundred and six days after the events on the ground, the news broke on the front page of *The Times* in London. While the premeditated and massive attack was perhaps not so very different from military operations by other colonial powers, news of this massacre in 1972 inflicted a major blow on the legitimacy of the Portuguese regime.

The official Portuguese narrative on the events at Wiriamu was demonstrated to be a tissue of lies, and this falsification was another element in the increasing pressure on the dictatorship and played its part in the fall of the Estado Novo, the Portuguese dictatorship.

The Portuguese government had avoided giving any details of the Colonial Wars which began in 1961 in Angola. Insurgencies against Portuguese rule followed in Guiné Portuguesa in 1963 and in Mozambique in 1964.

One of the motivations behind the Carnation Revolution, which overthrew the government of Marcelo Caetano in 1974, was the growing realisation among the people of Portugal that the Portuguese armed forces were using extreme violence against the African peoples of the colonies.



*Brigadier António Videira Photo Wikipedia*

## Frelimo

The nationalist organisation Frelimo (Frente de Libertação de Mozambique) was founded by Eduardo Mondlane in 1964. He appealed to the Portuguese government for a peaceful handover of power, but the government viewed his group as Communist-inspired, and a direct threat to the implantation of Portuguese civilisation and culture in Africa.

The Commander in Chief of Portuguese troops in Mozambique was General Kaúlza de Arriaga (1969-1974). He successfully master-minded the most extensive and expensive counter-insurgency operation (Operation Gordian Knot) in northern Mozambique in 1970. Its success caused Frelimo to relocate its operations to the district of Tete.

The Province of Tete in northwest Mozambique was bordered on three sides by Malawi to the east, by Zambia to the north, and by Southern Rhodesia to the west. It was difficult for the insurgents to maintain a front in this province without support from a neighbouring country, but that support was forthcoming in Zambia by 1972.

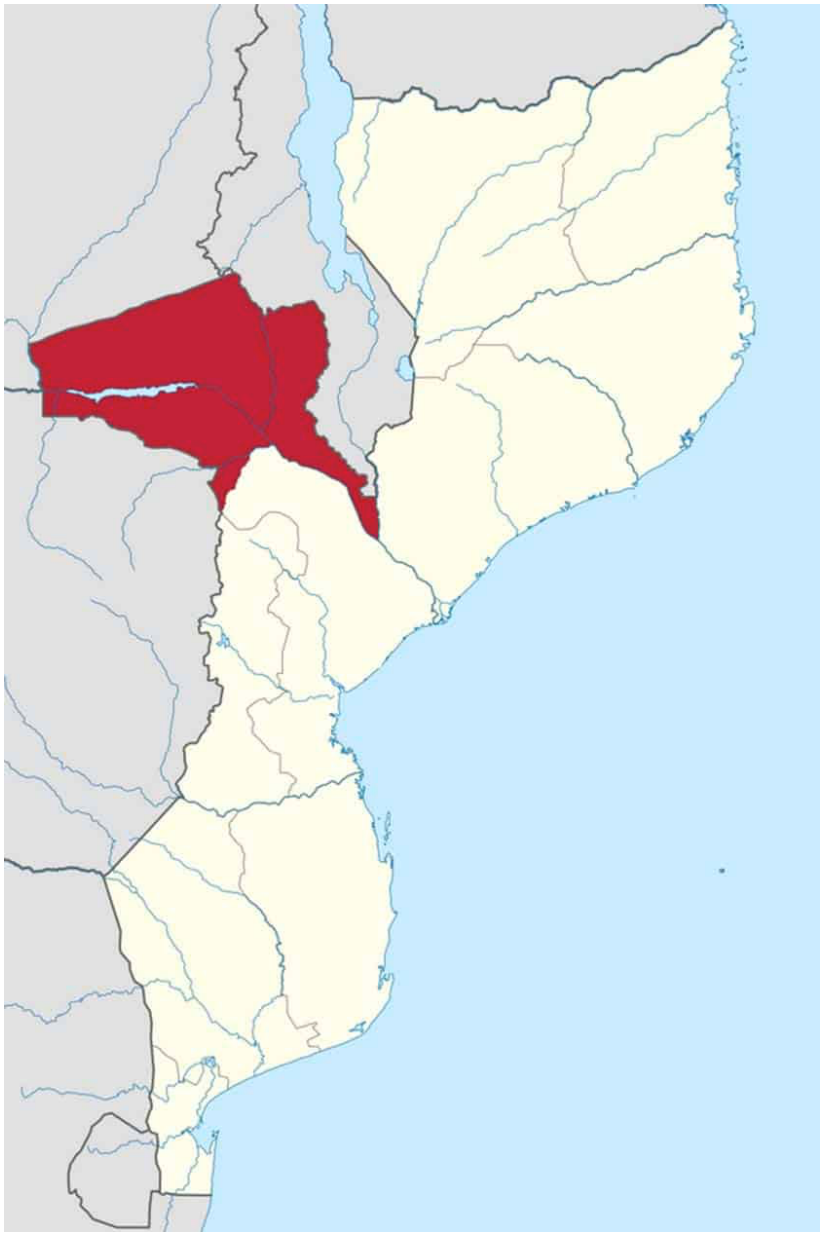
## Tete District

The C-in-C gave command to his favourite subordinate, Colonel Armindo Videira, who was known to have an aversion to negotiations with his opponents, and to favour a style of fighting which took no prisoners. His forces made preventive attacks to eliminate enemy bases and made indiscriminate attacks in their patrol areas.

The Tete area became a target for various massacres, two of which at Estima and Mucumbura were documented by the Catholic missionaries in the region but attracted no publicity.

In late 1972, rebel forces began to occupy the area to the south of the town of Tete, from where they attacked Portuguese military convoys. It appeared to the Portuguese commander that the villages near Wiriamu were infiltrated by rebels, and he decided that they must be eliminated.

The young commander of a platoon of special forces was ordered to the Staff Headquarters at the town of Tete at 06h30 of December 16. Colonel Videira instructed him to take his men and to eliminate the *turras* (an army slang term for terrorists) who had infiltrated the five villages of the Wiriamu area. These villages were called Chaworha, Juawu, Wiriamu, Djemusse and Riachu, and they became the targets of Operation Marosca.



*Tete District, Mozambique Photo Wikipedia*

**The Attack – Chaworha**

Portuguese sources are scant, but, over the years, investigators have been able to reconstruct the events of that day.

First, the perimeter of the five target villages was bombed by aircraft of the Portuguese Air Force. Accounts show that five helicopters landed within this area, although only three have been identified. One machine landed at Chaworha and disgorged agents in the uniform of the DGS (the secret police of Portugal), who ordered the villagers to gather on the land of their chief.

One man, Consembera, sauntered from the village houses towards a giant tree, seemingly oblivious to the activity around him. The Portuguese agents shot him down, and immediately opened fire on the crowd, killing 53 people. Some villagers succeeded in fleeing, and the section commander shouted, “Kill them all.We don’t want any witnesses alive!”

One group of agents piled the bodies to set fire to them, shooting anyone who moved. António Mixone had fallen unhurt but unconscious near the pile of corpses, and was awakened by the heat. Leading his four-year-old brother by the hand, he fled the scene, as did four others. As he escaped to the next village, António was shot in the shoulder.

On the following day, a Portuguese militia-man approached António. As he wore the uniform of a different service, he was able to avoid orders from those armed agents searching for survivors, and he took António to a religious hospital at Tete, where Sister Lúcia dressed his wound.

**The Attack – Juawu and Wiriamu**

At Juawu, as soon as their helicopter took off, agents moved to demolish the village. They forced villagers into huts and threw grenades inside, shooting those who tried to escape. One man fled before the shooting started, carrying a goat on his shoulders, and a child under each arm.

At the village of Wiriamu itself, the commandos set fire to huts full of people, and directed others to a large hut where a party was taking place. The commandos shut the door after throwing in a number of grenades. The explosives killed everyone inside and blew the roof off. Before sunset, the commandos moved away, shooting fugitives as they went.



*General Kaúlza de Arriaga Photo Wikipedia*

**The Attack – Djemusse**

The liquidation of Djemusse was delayed, as two commandos subjected villagers to intense questioning about Frelimo and the insurgents. Where were they, and where were their bases? Some villagers were lifted off in a helicopter to police headquarters, where they were tortured for information.

As night approached, the commandos tricked the frightened villagers into running away to save their lives, using this as a pretext to shoot them down. The commandos stayed in the area for three more days, hunting down the fugitives from the five villages.

## The Aftermath

The regional commander in Tete ordered the troops to return to the villages in order to get rid of the bodies. They were instructed to leave their weapons, and take only spades, but they disobeyed, since they did not want to be caught defenceless in an ambush.

These commandos were airlifted by helicopter to the sites of the killings. Covering their noses with masks soaked in Old Spice aftershave, they buried or burned those bodies that they encountered.

This unit was not picked up by helicopter as agreed and was attacked in a Frelimo ambush. The former commander of this unit still maintains that his men were abandoned on purpose, so that they would be eliminated and unable to bear witness to the killings.

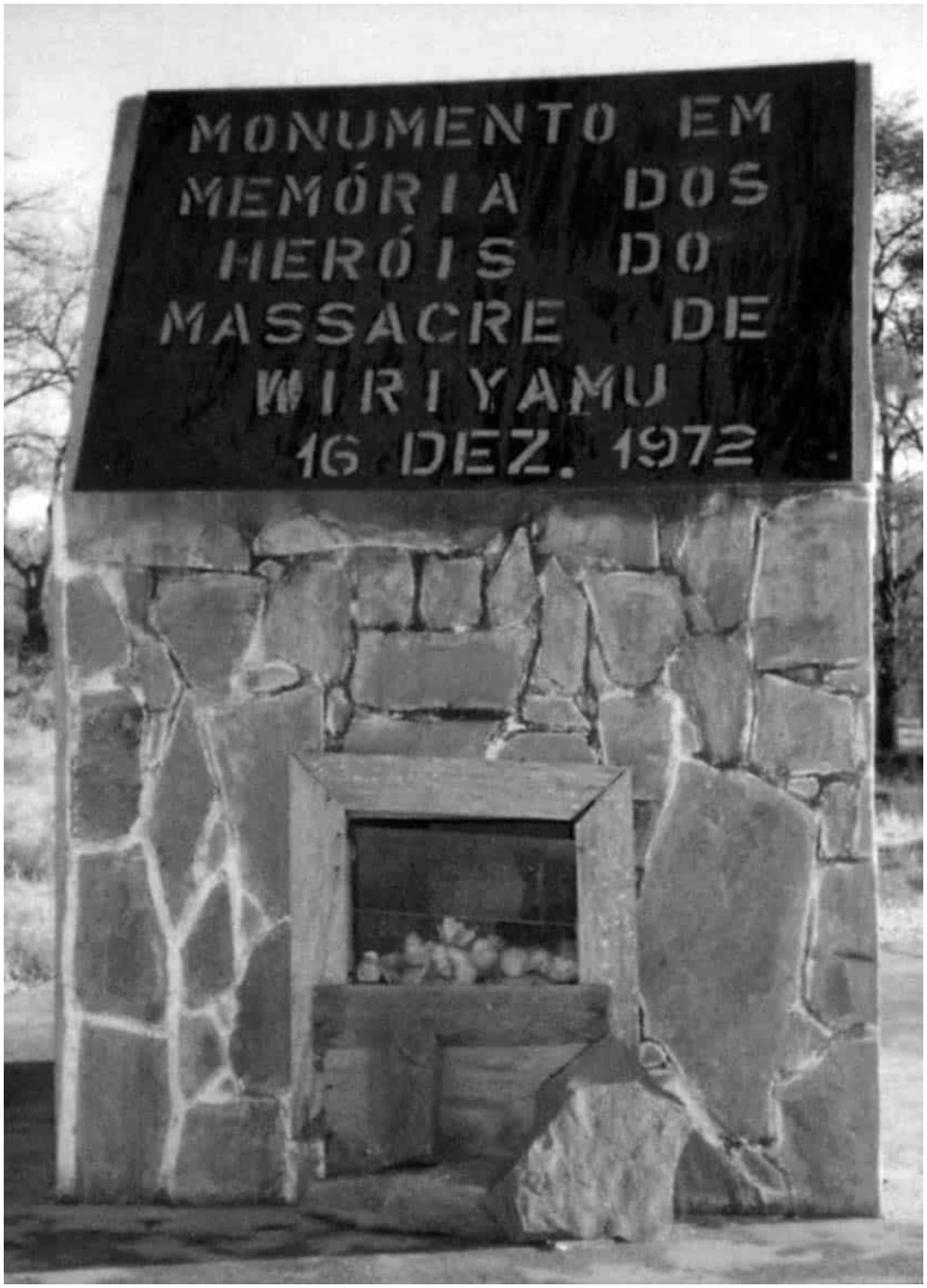
## The Aftermath – Father Ferrão

On the day following the massacre, Father Domingos Ferrão of the Tete diocese began to collect information about the casualties. He interviewed many of the survivors and compiled a list of 500 casualties, of whom 178 were identified by name.

Father Ferrão identified 31 who had been killed by grenade inside closed huts; 10 who had been beaten and kicked to death; women who were violated, others disembowelled, others shot after extensive tortures.

Subsequent investigation by Mustafa Dhada showed that Ferrão's list was incomplete, and that the true total of those identified by name reached 385. This number does not include those who were hunted and shot in the bush, or those who were taken to police stations.

The massacre in the Wiriamu area accounted for about 28% of the population of the five villages.




*Monument in memory of the heroes of the Massacre of Wiriyamu – 16 Dec 1972*

**Reports of the Massacre**

The Catholic missionaries in Tete were horrified at what they saw and heard, but their pleas to their superiors in the church hierarchy to investigate further fell on deaf ears.

They determined to publicise reports of the massacre in the outside world and to demand an intervention by the United Nations.

Two Spanish priests succeeded in sending abroad a description of the events at Wiriamu. Father Miguel Buendía managed to smuggle a lengthy report aboard an aircraft as he travelled to Madrid, and Father Alberto Font Castellà took another version aboard a different flight.

An Italian religious magazine published details at the beginning of June, but this report was scarcely noticed.

In the meantime, Father Adrian Hastings travelled from Britain to Southern Rhodesia to give a series of lectures. Learning of the killings, he returned to London via Madrid, where he succeeded in accessing the reports. Having ascertained their authenticity, he asked the two Spaniards for permission to publish their news.

On the afternoon of Friday, July 6, 1973, Hastings telephoned the assistant editor of *The Times*, Louis Heren, who had been involved in the publication of articles about the massacre at My Lai in Vietnam. After the publication in *The Times* of the initial report on Tuesday, July 10, *The Sunday Times* published the result of a more detailed investigation.

Frelimo's female unit targeted commandos who had taken part in the Operação Marosca, particularly after the report appeared in *The Times*. They let it be known that those individuals who had taken part in this outrage were now themselves targets for retribution. One of them was assassinated by grenade in a shower cubicle as he was preparing for a night out. This event led to further detentions, interrogations and deaths in retribution.

**Caetano's official visit to London**

At this time, Portuguese Prime Minister Marcelo Caetano was preparing to make an official visit to London to celebrate the 600$^{th}$ anniversary on the Oldest Alliance between Portugal and Britain.

After consulting his ambassador in London, Caetano went ahead with his visit, and subsequently became the target of public demonstrations in London.

The official Portuguese response to the reports of massacre was to deny the "allegations", and authorities in Mozambique prepared an alternative site to demonstrate to British journalists that the allegations were false.

This site was called Williamo, and journalists reported that not only was Williamo too small to be the place where the massacre had happened, but also that there were no bullets, casings or any other material evidence to be seen. But before the journalists could interview the religious sisters who had treated and interviewed the survivors, the Portuguese authorities expelled them from Tete district.

Nine months after the publication of the reports into the massacre at Wiriamu, the dictatorship in Portugal fell. The new provisional government in Portugal affirmed the veracity of the articles published in *The Times* and, in November 1974, the United Nations also confirmed these reports.

As a result of the government investigation into the events at Wiriamu, Prime Minister Caetano dismissed General Kaúlza de Arriaga, who became the only general to be dismissed during the Colonial Wars. And Brigadier Videira, the commander who had ordered the massacre, was also sacked and ordered to return to Portugal in disgrace.

Read more from **Peter Booker** about **Portugal's Colonial War in Guiné – the beginning of the end** or **Portugal's secret police**.

**Peter Booker**

Peter Booker co-founded with his wife Lynne the Algarve History Association.
www.algarvehistoryassociation.com