Necklace of death for Mozambique's 'ninjas'

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MAPUTO — "Ninja, ninja", shouted a crowd of children as they chased a frightened girl into a police station near Maputo's central hospital.

These days to be called a "ninja", a slang term for criminals taken from martial arts films, can mean death.

"Necklacing", the placing of a petrol-filled tyre around a victim's neck, is becoming a common form of execution. One man who was necklaced escaped and reached a hospital, so his attackers threatened the same treatment for any staff who helped him.

About 20 so-called ninjas, suspected thieves and murderers, have been lynched by mobs since last month as people have lost faith in the state's will to deal with soaring crime in crowded cities.

The fact that the man in charge of police, Interior Minister Manuel Antonio, was detained last month for plotting a coup against President Joaquim Chissano, has not bolstered public confidence which has been lowered by belt-tightening policies and the inflow of thousands of war refugees. Necklacing can be seen as a desperate last bid by the urban poor to take matters into their own hands.

Mr Chissano's Frelimo government has responded by calling on the army and Defence Minister General Alberto Chipande.

After midnight, military police can be seen looking for potential troublemakers. Army and police sweeps in shanty towns and an industrial suburb have led to 400 arrests. "Operation Ninja" is also underway in provinces.

Deserters from the armed forces and militia are believed to be responsible for much of the dramatic rise in urban crime. — The Independent News Service.