

African floods: Western governments' indifference to plight of Mozambique

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Southeast Africa is presently experiencing the heaviest rainstorms in 50 years. Three weeks of downpours, beginning February 9, have devastated entire areas of the continent. Floods that have also swept through the neighbouring countries of South Africa, Botswana and Zimbabwe have particularly hit Mozambique. Some places have seen a whole year's rain fall in just three days.

Mozambique, a country four times the size of Britain, has been effectively cut in two by the floodwaters north of the capital Maputo. The river valleys of the Limpopo, the Elephant River and Save River have broken their banks and flooded enormous tracts of land. In Gaza province the floods have devastated a 50 kilometre-wide area of land stretching from the coast to the border region with South Africa. The river Limpopo has swollen to 3 kilometres wide in places.

The terrible plight faced by thousands was exacerbated on February 22, when cyclone Eline hit the Mozambique coast near the central city of Beira, with winds that measured 160 mph. Another cyclone is currently in the Indian Ocean to the east of Mozambique and threatens to come ashore unleashing more destruction.

Many fear that the worst is still to come. In Mozambique water levels could rise even higher as the rains drain into the river valleys of that country. Dams in Mozambique's neighbouring countries, like the Kariba dam in Zimbabwe, will also start overflowing, adding to the deluge.

Hundreds of people are estimated to have died in the floods across Southern Africa, but the final death toll is likely to be many times higher. The British Broadcasting Corporation reported torrential rains wreaking havoc across the Northern Province, Mpumalanga and Gauteng. In Alexandra, just north of

Johannesburg, squatters' homes have been swept away. In Soweto the narrow streets look more like canals. People have been using ropes to haul themselves across the water, but are often drowned in the strong current.

Already 200,000 Mozambicans have lost their homes. Around a million people are at risk from water-borne diseases, especially malaria and cholera. Up to 100,000 people are in imminent danger, marooned on rooftops or clinging to the tops of trees, some with children on their backs. Just five helicopters of the South African Defence Force and two from Malawi are operating throughout the area. In the first few days, they were able to pluck around 3,000 people from treetops, roofs and pylons in the Limpopo valley.

Thousands more are still stranded, perching above the waters of the Limpopo in Gaza province and above the floodwaters of the Save river valley in Inhambane province. Up to February 27 there still had been no helicopter rescue flights in the Save valley. Rescue workers raised the desperate plight of these marooned people, who have been clinging to trees for days, without food or clean water, and afraid to go to sleep in case they fall into the water. There is little time to rescue many before they are completely overtaken by hunger or fatigue and are swept away by the floodwaters.

Whole towns and cities are without power or drinking water and food is also running short. Some towns, with tens of thousands of inhabitants, have been completely submerged.

Michelle Quintaglie of the UN World Food Programme (WFP), interviewed on television from Mozambique, described the level of aid as completely inadequate. She warned that thousands of people's lives were at risk over the next 24 to 48 hours and that the immediate need is for rescue boats and flights. Other

aid workers joined her in spelling out the scale of the potential disaster and the inadequate level of response.

This disaster has been growing for nearly a month and the governments of the rich industrial countries have done nothing. The flood's devastating impact was clear from the beginning. By February 11, six days after the rains began, Mbabane, the capital of Swaziland, had been without drinking water for two days because of flooding. The UN had already made a call for funds on that date. According to the BBC, "the freak floods which hit South Africa and Mozambique, this week [February 11] have claimed scores of lives and left more than 100,000 homeless". The day before, the Mozambique government had appealed for \$2.7 million to help the homeless.

There has been much hand wringing by government ministers in the West, like Britain's International Development Secretary Clare Short. She said that Britain "stood ready" to provide more aid, but that it was an "organisational problem rather than financial". She claimed that Britain is "hunting for helicopters and we can pay for them". However, Short later said that she had spoken to Ministry of Defence officials and been told there was no more equipment currently near the disaster.

This was exposed as a barefaced lie when a defence expert told the BBC that Ukrainian heavy lifting aircraft could be contracted to carry helicopters into the area within days. He also pointed out that the British Royal Air Force could transport Royal Marines with assault boats to help in the rescue.

The slow and meagre response by Western governments is in stark contrast to the speed and scale of their actions in launching their brutal war against Iraq in the Persian Gulf.

The United Nations originally initiated a \$13 million appeal. After protests this was increased to \$65.3 million. But there is no guarantee the money will be raised. Britain has contributed £2.2 million to the disaster fund and the United States just \$1.7 million. The level of aid pledged by the West can be put in perspective when it is set against the \$80 million a year Mozambique is forced to spend on debt repayments to the world's banks. This figure is over twice the amount spent on primary education and four times that spent on primary health care in the country.

It was expected that aid being used to finance the

helicopter rescue flights would be exhausted by the beginning of this week, but more money has been provided to extend the flights for another 10 days. South Africa has agreed to supply six more helicopters for the rescue missions, but only on the basis that the finances to run them—\$2,000 an hour—was paid up-front. Only three of the helicopters currently involved in the rescue missions have hoist equipment suitable to lift those stranded by the flooding.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimates that around 30,000 children under five years of age are at risk of malnutrition in the flooded region. In Mozambique there are about 15,000 pregnant women in the affected areas, and around 5,000 are due to give birth in the next three months. Mozambique already has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world.

The country faces a total collapse of its infrastructure. More than 80 percent of the population live off the land. Harvests of crops such as maize and groundnuts due to start are largely gone and thousands of cattle and other livestock have been drowned or swept away.

Mozambique was formerly the world's poorest country. A former Portuguese colony, it became independent in 1975. It suffered 16 years of civil war fighting South African-backed forces. The end of the civil war in 1992 left the country devastated. It has experienced a 10 percent growth in GDP over the last three years, but this has not benefited ordinary working people. The government has carried through privatisations as part of IMF restructuring conditions, cut government spending and opened up the economy to private international capital. An extreme example was the sale of a region the size of Israel to Texan billionaire James Ulysses Blanchard III for development as game reserves and tourist facilities.



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