Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Malawi face a humanitarian catastrophe in the wake of Cyclone Idai

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Large swathes of Southeast Africa face a humanitarian crisis in the wake of Cyclone Idai which swept through Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Malawi this past week. The storm, categorized by the United Nations as the "worst ever disaster to hit the southern hemisphere," has already destroyed crops, caused massive flooding, rendered hundreds of thousands homeless.

While the official death toll as of this writing stands at 552, Mozambique's president, Filipe Nyusi, reported that more than 1,000 people had been killed by high winds and widespread flooding. The storm is believed to have affected over 2.6 million people.

Mozambique, the country where the storm first made landfall, is perhaps the worst hit, with vast swathes of land completely submerged. The port city of Beira, home to 500,000 people, was hit on Friday. Media reports indicate that the city appears to be an "island in the ocean" and was initially completely cut off from the rest of the world.

Jill Lovell, an Australian running a missionary school in Beira, was able to send out an email message, cited by the *Guardian*, describing the situation: "It is a total mess here ... People are in trees and on rooftops. Emergency relief crews are slowly coming in. Rains continue to make it all even harder. So many lives lost and homes destroyed."

Reports from pilots attempting rescue missions describe chaotic and heart-wrenching scenes of completely submerged homes, with people clinging on to what remains of roofs, tree trunks and small islands that have appeared overnight without any possibility of accessing food or clean water. The situation is so grim that pilots have been forced to make the difficult call of having to decide whom to save.

In its report on the catastrophe, the *Guardian* quotes Ian Scher of Rescue SA, highlighting the awful reality: "Sometimes we can only save two out of five, sometimes we rather drop food and go to someone else who's in bigger danger ... We just save what we can save and the others will perish."

The *Guardian* also provided a graphic description of the situation in Beira's central hospital when the storm hit.

Mark Ellul, a British doctor in Beira, described the hospital as already being in a bad situation prior to the storm, and operating at full capacity. When the storm hit, ripping apart the roof and tearing out windows, patients who could walk tried to get out, while those who couldn't remained clinging to their beds. Ellul barricaded himself under the sink in his hotel room to ride out the storm, coming out only to see "debris thrown everywhere, trees ripped up and roofs thrown off, [and] electricity poles pushed over the roads." Many of the people he met told him that "they had seen bodies in the street or had had neighbours killed."

There have been reports of dams close to Beira bursting, though it is not yet confirmed. Dams across the region are thought to be full to the brim, and will have to open their floodgates soon. The bigger threat would be if the massive Kariba and Cahora Bassa dams on the Zambezi river were to be affected. As of now, that does not seem to be the case, but both dams were built about 50 years ago and the Kariba needs urgent maintenance.

In Zimbabwe, residents in the Southeastern town of Chimanimani told of losing relatives and neighbors to the storm and watching houses and even bodies being

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swept away to neighboring Mozambique. In the nearby town of Chipinge, over 20,000 homes have been described as “partially damaged” and over 600 completely destroyed.

According to UN reports, the storm has directly affected over 920,000 people in Malawi. The worst hit were the lower Shire river districts of Chikwawa and Nsanje in the far south of the country. Half of the districts in Nsanje have been flooded with over 11,000 households being displaced.

Rick Emenaker, a pilot for a humanitarian aviation organization that was carrying out a survey of the damage, told the South African news site Lowvelder: “It was a heartbreaking flight today as we flew over many miles of flooded land in the Buzi River basin ... a number of villages were completely buried in the flood waters. The magnitude of this disaster is hard to comprehend.”

Even as the storm subsides, the disappearance of bridges and impassable roads have made the rescue operations as well as the delivery of vitally needed food, clean water and medicines an extremely risky proposition. *Medicins Sans Frontiers,* in reporting its response to the disaster, has highlighted the fact that the worst affected areas remain inaccessible, or only accessible through helicopter, or in some cases, boats. At this point, UN and Red Cross officials have already warned of the high risk of outbreaks of cholera and typhoid in the affected areas.

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