

# Historic humanitarian disaster unfolds in southeast Africa in the wake of Cyclone Idai

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The dire social and economic conditions which prevail for millions of workers and toilers in Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Malawi and Madagascar have been tragically exposed by Cyclone Idai, which has left a historic humanitarian crisis in its wake across the southeast African nations.

Some 1.7 million people were in the direct path of what a spokesperson for the World Meteorological Organization described as “one of the worst weather-related disasters in the Southern Hemisphere.” The United Nations has made an initial appeal for more than \$40 million to provide emergency aid to more than 400,000 in Mozambique, the country hardest hit by the storm. The sum is tiny compared to the immense social needs.

As of this writing the official death toll stands at 504, with 308 recorded in Mozambique, 139 in Zimbabwe, 56 in Malawi and one in Madagascar. This figure is expected to rise substantially as contact is reestablished with more remote or totally devastated areas. Mozambique’s President Filipe Nyusi remarked after surveying damage this week that he estimated more than a thousand people had been killed in the country.

The storm made landfall in Beira, Mozambique last Friday, destroying much of the country’s fourth largest city with winds in excess of 175 kilometers per hour, knocking down homes and inundating it with rain and ocean storm surge. “Not a building was untouched. The power lines are down, pulled down by toppled trees.” The World Food Program’s Gerald Bourk told NPR about conditions in the city of more than 500,000, whose people are crowded into neighborhoods where homes are cheaply constructed. “It will take months for the people of the city and the city itself to recover.”

Chimanimani, a mountain town of a few thousand people, was among the hardest hit in Zimbabwe. There

have been at least 40 burials in the small town since the beginning of the week, after a rock slide crushed a dormitory full of sleeping students and raging waters swept residents away.

The effects of the storm were also felt in South Africa where an ongoing wave of rolling blackouts was exacerbated after transmission lines were cut from the hydroelectric dam at Cahora Bassa in western Mozambique.

One week after landfall, as flood waters are now beginning to recede, it is still unclear how many hundreds of thousands across the affected region have been stranded by the storm’s impact and are in need of rescue or emergency aid. Major roads have been washed out, making many villages and cities accessible only by boat or airplane.

An inland lake of flood waters up to six meters deep has covered an estimated 3,000 square kilometers, an area larger than the US state of Rhode Island. Bodies have been spotted floating in the flood waters in Beira and across the region. Thousands have been stranded on rooftops and islands in the waters.

Residents of Nhamatanda, an area 60 kilometers northwest of Beira, told the AFP that water came rushing in and swept away their neighbors. “Water came like a tsunami and destroyed most things. We were prisoners on the roof,” Jose Batio told the news agency after being rescued along with his wife.

Doctors Without Borders (MSF) warned that those who survived the flood waters now face the danger of water-borne diseases including cholera, in addition to other difficulties resulting from the damage of multiple health care facilities. “I am able to say that all health centers and hospitals have been affected,” Caroline Rose, MSF’s head of mission in Mozambique, told *The New Humanitarian*. “Several health centers have lost

their roofs and are in very, very bad condition.”

The death toll and damage from Cyclone Idai is expected to surpass the Mozambique floods in February 2000 when sustained heavy rains were compounded by Cyclone Eline, which made landfall south of Beira. At the time it was considered the worst natural disaster to hit the country in a century, killing more than 700 people and leaving 463,000 homeless.

The 2018-2019 Southwest Indian Ocean cyclone season has been above average, with 12 storm systems forming since November. Eight of these storms, including Idai, have been classified as intense tropic cyclones, the most recorded since consistent satellite tracking began in 1967. As the global temperature continues to rise due to human-made climate change, scientists project that the number of tropical cyclones that form in the southern Indian Ocean will decrease, however, rising sea levels will put increasing numbers of people at risk of being inundated by storm surge and rain from those that do make landfall over Africa.

Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Malawi are among the poorest countries in the world, an outcome of their colonial past, the bankruptcy of the petty-bourgeois nationalist movements and current economic exploitation by the imperialist powers, facilitated by each country's ruling elite. These regions are seen by the Western imperialists as critical for the extraction of raw resources and little else.

Mozambique was held under Portuguese colonial rule for more than 470 years and shortly after independence was granted in 1975 a 15-year civil war erupted, fueled by an apartheid South Africa backed by Great Britain and the US, which resulted in more than a million deaths. According to the International Monetary Fund, Mozambique ranks 180th out of 186 countries for gross domestic product per capita when accounting for purchasing power. As of 2016 the country's government owed more than \$9.8 billion to foreign lenders, foremost the IMF and World Bank.

Zimbabwe, established as the British colony of Rhodesia in 1880, did not attain independence until 1980. The country has been under the control of the ZANU-PF regime ever since, first under Robert Mugabe and now Emerson Mnangagwa, with disastrous results for the majority of the population. More than 70 percent of Zimbabweans live in poverty, and skyrocketing inflation has put access to decent

housing and other basic resources out of the reach of millions.

Malawi, a British colony from the 1880s until independence in 1964, remains one of the least developed countries in the world. Life expectancy for a child born in Malawi is only 50 years and HIV/AIDS rates remain high among the adult population. An estimated 27,000 people die every year from HIV/AIDS and more than 500,000 children have been orphaned as a result.

The criminal exploitation and underdevelopment of these countries makes inevitable widespread destruction even from weather events, which can be predicted many days in advance. With endemic poverty and infrastructure already criminally insufficient, workers and farmers in these countries have no emergency options when storms hit.



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