

Extreme social crisis ravages Mozambique in wake of Cyclone Idai

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Cyclone Idai, which slammed into Mozambique on March 14, has left Mozambicans in a state of catastrophe. The devastation left in the tropical storm's wake has produced a full-blown humanitarian crisis, exposing the impoverished conditions already present before Cyclone Idai hit.

According to UNICEF, more than 3 million people across the region affected by Idai urgently need humanitarian assistance, including 1.5 million children. The disaster is the worse natural catastrophe to hit southern Africa in decades.

In Mozambique, the country most affected by the storm, more than 2 million are in need of emergency aid, including 1 million children. UNICEF warned of the severe threat of the spread of diseases after Idai's destruction of vital infrastructure, such as sanitary water sources and more than 50 clinics and hospitals in the country. Massive flooding has led to a high volume of stagnant water, which threatens to unleash an epidemic of waterborne illnesses, such as cholera.

UNICEF launched an appeal for \$122 million to support its response to the disaster. In Beira, a coastal city of 500,000 and the hardest hit by Cyclone Idai, UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore told the media, "The lives of millions of children and families are on the line, and we urgently need to mount a rapid and effective humanitarian response across all three countries [Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe]."

Scores of Mozambicans have been made homeless with the destruction of homes by massive flood waters brought on by the storm which washed away entire neighborhoods. Many people across the country have taken up temporary residence atop buildings and other elevated structures to avoid the high water. Exacerbating the catastrophe, a food crisis has emerged, with thousands of acres of farmland flooded

by the storm, which wiped out most crops.

On Friday, the Portuguese news agency *Lusa* reported that a vicious outbreak of cholera has begun to sweep through the country, with 139 victims so far, and the epidemic far from contained. Many of the afflicted originated from the squalid homeless camps set up for victims. Nearly 1 million vaccines were rushed to the region as a small number of health workers strove to cope with the outbreak by setting up improvised treatment centers.

The situation for millions of Mozambicans is likely to worsen over the next days and weeks, as many areas devastated remain inaccessible. The storm has left nearly 1,000 dead. With daily reports of bodies discovered scattered in fields and floating in rivers, the death toll is certain to climb.

On Wednesday, Stephen Fonseca, a chief forensic analyst in Africa for the International Committee of the Red Cross, told the *Washington Post* of the massive flooding caused by the cyclone ripping through Magaro, a farming village, where rescue workers are finding corpses of victims on a daily basis since Idai hit. So far, 156 bodies have been found. These victims likely died during the surge of water that washed over the region. Fonseca stated that the dead he had found were not included in the official toll.

Out of fear for his safety, Fonseca told the *Post* of regrettably having to leave an unidentified body 30 feet up a tree and snagged on a branch in an area infested with crocodiles.

"Eventually it is going to separate and fall once the ligaments loosen up," he said. "But there's no way to get it without someone getting hurt, or falling to the crocs." Fonseca said.

The magnitude of the disaster is exacerbated by the lack of social spending for emergency services and vital

infrastructure to cope with such natural disasters. Nowhere is this illustrated more clearly than in Sofala province, the region hit hardest by Cyclone Idai, an area especially prone to flooding, which occurs two to three times a year.

According to *Foreign Policy*, the Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery states that Mozambique ranks third in Africa among nations most exposed to weather-related disasters. *Foreign Policy* created a map of the disaster's reach for its website, reporting that some 836 square miles were under flood waters in Mozambique, creating what the publication terms "inland oceans."

The lack of vital infrastructure and services to provide assistance to the Mozambican masses in the wake of the country's worst disaster is nothing short of criminal.

Mozambique is a nation of acute social contrast. With a population of nearly 29 million, it is the 16th richest country in Africa, and among the most socially unequal in the world. According to a 2017 report by New World Wealth, a market research firm based in Johannesburg, South Africa, there are 1,100 millionaires residing in the country. Of this group, 50 individuals hold wealth totaling over \$10 million.

Contrasted to the obscene accumulation of wealth by a small layer of elites, according to 2016 figures published by the World Bank, 60 percent of the population lives in extreme poverty, with 80 percent left unable to afford enough food daily to maintain proper health. The majority also subsist on less than \$2 a day.

Underlying this lopsided social construct is the fact that Mozambique holds vast economic resources in oil and gas reserves and mineral deposits of marble, bentonite, coal, gold, bauxite, granite, titanium and gemstones. The World Bank estimates that Mozambique holds untapped oil and gas reserves totaling over \$100 trillion, and the country has the fourth largest reserves of natural gas in the world.

Key to understanding the lack of funding made available for the population to deal with Idai's crisis are the American and European banks and corporations that have lined up to exploit Mozambique's natural resources and its working masses.

In recent years, Exxon-Mobil, British Petroleum and Royal Dutch Shell have secured billions of dollars in

large contracts to extract Mozambique's massive offshore gas reserves.



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