

60,000 feared dead: Residents of cyclone-hit Mayotte boo Macron

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President Emmanuel Macron arrived in France's Indian Ocean archipelago of Mayotte on Thursday after cyclone Chido devastated it last weekend. From when his visit began, the banker-president was faced with angry crowds who booed him as he arrogantly lectured them that they should be proud to be French and called to crack down on Comoran immigrants.

As Macron arrived, Réunion1, a public TV station on Réunion island, reported that rescue and health workers in Mayotte believe the cyclone may have killed 60,000 people—nearly a fifth of the registered population. France's monarchist interior minister, Bruno Retailleau, dismissed the report as a "rumor," as Réunion1 had pulled it from its web site. But contacted by *Libération*, Réunion1 journalist Raphaël Kahn defended the now-deleted report, insisting this is what Mayotte rescue workers had said.

The cyclone's 220km/h winds destroyed sheet-metal houses in which much of Mayotte's population lives, wiping out hillside slums in the capital, Mamoudzou. The French government is hiding the extent of the disaster caused by its decades of neglect of Mayotte's infrastructure, claiming that it has confirmed 35 dead and 2,500 wounded. The interior ministry admitted, however, that its own estimate "does not match the reality that 100,000 people live in precarious housing."

A further reason that death tolls are flagrant underestimates is that communication between the Small Island, on which Mayotte airport is located, and the rest of Mayotte, particularly the Large Island on which the bulk of the population lives, is very limited. Several barges that used to serve as ferries between Mayotte's different islands were sunk in the storm. Food and water are only beginning to arrive via airlift to the Small Island.

Mayotte's notoriously poor water system has

collapsed, and residents of Mamoudzou's Kawni slum told Europe1 they are drinking dirty water or not drinking anything at all. Amina, who drank water out of a stream that formed after it rained, said: "We don't have a choice, we drink this water even though it's muddy. We do our best to filter it, but anyway if we don't do that, we die."

Ibrahim said he would go to a spring lower down on the hill where Kawni sits: "There is a spring there, but even that water is not particularly clean. I'm going to drink it anyway, I have to for the time being. For now I'm not sick, but I do not know what will happen later."

Mayotte residents booed and publicly criticized Macron at every step of his brief two-day tour of the archipelago, which exposed his government's incompetence and his flagrant contempt for the population.

As Macron toured Mayotte hospital, which was badly damaged by the cyclone, a man shouted down at him from the balcony. "Sir, I listened to you, the answers you gave were not relevant," he said. "You say that help has arrived and that water has arrived. ... I came to tell you that what you are saying on the radio does not correspond to the reality we are living on the ground."

The man also pointed out the responsibility of the Macron government and its predecessors in this predictable catastrophe: "For the slums, everyone knew it was going to be a disaster. ... Sir, your administrations are collapsing."

Later on, as Macron was booed by a crowd on Thursday night that chanted "Macron resign," "This is rubbish" and "Water, water, water," he arrogantly shouted: "Do not divide people! If you divide people we are screwed, because you are happy to be in France. Because if this wasn't France, you would be 10,000

times more in the shit.”

When he continued, “Don’t go saying that certain people are on one side, and others are on the other side,” the crowd responded by chanting: “Yes, yes, yes they are.”

At one point, Macron was reduced to declaring: “I’m not the cyclone. I’m not responsible.”

In fact, Macron and his predecessors of all political colorations are responsible for the vast majority of the deaths and the suffering in Mayotte. French authorities were well aware that Mayotte, which was devastated by storms in 1898, when it was still a French colony, was vulnerable to cyclones. Even though the dangers of sheet-metal housing and the catastrophic state of public utilities were well-known, authorities did nothing to avert this predictable catastrophe.

Macron’s attempt to privatize the construction of public infrastructure, handing contracts to build water mains to the private Vinci corporation, turned into a corporate boondoggle. EU investigators found that over €600 million in state funds had been embezzled. This underscores how the failure to build necessary utilities and concrete housing capable of withstanding serious storms is rooted in Macron’s right-wing, pro-business policies.

Yesterday, Macron tried to cover up this record by inciting anti-immigrant xenophobia. He denounced immigrants in an interview announcing a minute of silence in France on December 23 for the victims of Cyclone Chido. While many of the victims of the cyclone were undocumented Comoran immigrant workers who did not go to shelters in order to avoid capture by police, Macron pledged a further crackdown on Comoran immigrants in Mayotte.

Pledging to double the number of deportations from 22,000 in 2023, he called “to fight illegal immigration, and that is necessary as we all know that Mayotte is a region facing an unprecedented situation requiring us to be much more efficient in deporting undocumented immigrants. I say this in all sincerity, otherwise we will never be able to rebuild Mayotte.”

Macron also defended his claim that Mayotte would be in “10,000 times” more trouble without France. He claimed it was a necessary response to members of the far-right National Rally (RN) who “were insulting France by saying that it had done nothing,” to which he had to respond: “And so I said the truth.”

In reality, Macron’s foul-mouthed outburst further demonstrates the sclerotic character of the French capitalist regime and its contempt for the wellbeing of working people. The yearly increase of the personal fortune of Bernard Arnault, France’s wealthiest individual, is dozens or hundreds of times more than what would be required to update Mayotte’s water, transport and electricity infrastructure. Yet Macron has ignored the fundamental social needs of Mayotte’s population throughout his presidency, instead handing massive tax cuts to the wealthy.

The Mayotte disaster has provoked not only criticisms from the far-right RN, but also the various middle-class parties making up the New Popular Front (NFP) led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon. The Green Party’s Sandrine Rousseau complained of Macron, “I saw him in shirt sleeves asking if they are proud to be French. ... It’s not up to the task.”

Amid growing speculation that Macron’s financial and political backers in the bourgeoisie might force him to resign and hold early presidential elections, with RN leader Marine Le Pen as a favored candidate, leading France Unbowed (LFI) member Eric Coquerel said: “[Macron’s remarks] do not really require further commentary. ... Isn’t this a message to those who think that he above all must not leave: Who can imagine that this can go on for 30 months,” that is, until the end of his current term?

In fact, the disaster in Mayotte is rooted ultimately in the bankruptcy not only of Macron, but of the entire capitalist social order. This includes the NFP parties, which last year propped up Macron by calling off protests and strikes against his deeply unpopular pension cuts. They refused to campaign for the popular demand for a general strike to stop Macron’s pension cuts. By cutting across building a movement in the working class to bring down Macron, they propped up the regime whose malign neglect of Mayotte’s population created conditions for this tragedy.



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