

PRESBYTERIANS RESPOND TO STORMS IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

By Doug Tilton May 3, 2019

In recent weeks, two powerful cyclones have battered Mozambique in quick succession, causing widespread damage that affected neighboring countries, too. The unprecedented storms, apparently exacerbated by deforestation and climate change, prompted rapid response from Presbyterians, both in the region and in the USA.

Cyclone Idai developed in early March as a tropical depression off the coast of northern Mozambique. It initially made landfall on March 4, deluging southern Malawi and northern Mozambique for several days before moving east, into the Mozambique Channel. Just as it reached Madagascar, it suddenly reversed course. It gathered strength rapidly as it headed back to central Mozambique, making landfall again at Beira on March 15 with an intensity equivalent to a Category 2 hurricane.



Track of Cyclone Idai, March 4-17. Source: Wikipedia

Once over land, the storm's windspeed diminished rapidly, but it continued to inundate the region with heavy rains as it moved across central Mozambique and into eastern Zimbabwe. As much as 20 inches of rain fell in Zimbabwe's Chimanimani and Chipinge districts, causing extensive flooding and triggering mudslides. The storm left more than 1000 people dead—602 in

Mozambique, 344 in Zimbabwe and 60 in Malawi—injured thousands, and affected more than 3 million people across the region, many of whom were rendered homeless.



A family in Chimanimani digs in search of a missing family member days after Cyclone Idai hit the area.

Photo by: C. Mawhunga

Less than six weeks later, Cyclone Kenneth swept out of the Indian Ocean. It ravaged the Comoros Islands before making landfall on April 25 north of Pemba, near Mozambique's border with Tanzania and putting more than half a million people at risk.

Kenneth was unique in many ways. Equivalent to a Category 4 hurricane with sustained winds of 140 mph, it was the most powerful storm ever recorded in Southern Africa. It also made landfall farther north than any cyclone in the era of satellite imaging. And it was the first time that two storms of such strength had hit Mozambique in a single season. The city of Pemba, which escaped the brunt of the storm, recorded more than 16 inches of rain in a 48 hour period.

More than 40,000 homes in Cabo Delgado province were destroyed, leaving whole villages looking "like they had been bulldozed" [according](#) to the head of the regional United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

Cabo Delgado is much less densely populated than the Beira area, and the evacuation of some 30,000 people ahead of the storm helped to minimize casualties. Even so, by May 2, the death toll stood at 41, and it was continuing to rise as relief workers reached remote communities.

In the wake of both storms, local populations were threatened by health crises, particularly from cholera and other waterborne diseases. By mid-April, health workers recorded more than 4,000 confirmed cases of cholera with eight fatalities. On May 2, just days after Cyclone Kenneth dissipated, the provincial health officials had already identified 14 cases of cholera in Pemba and surrounding areas. According to the [World Health Organization](#), close to 200,000 people were at risk of disease, with 17 health facilities damaged by the storm.

The unprecedented intensity, duration and proximity of the storms may be explained, at least in part, by climate change. Meteorologist Eric Holthaus [said](#) "Not only is this [Cyclone Kenneth] an extremely intense rainfall event, globally, but it's being made worse because of climate change." In April, the [World Meteorological Organization](#) sent a delegation to Mozambique to identify ways to improve public safety, noting that the "impact of climate change and sea level rise on Mozambique's resilience to such tropical cyclones and extreme weather is also likely to feature in the discussions."

The two storms were "exactly what climate scientists warned would happen if we continue to warm our planet beyond its limits," [warned](#) Amnesty International's Secretary General, Kumi Naidoo. "The people of Mozambique are paying the price for dangerous climate change when they have done next to nothing to cause this crisis."

Deforestation may also have amplified the impact of the storms. Since 1980, Mozambique has lost some 370,000 square kilometres of its [forests](#) – an area larger than the size of Germany. The loss of tree cover and shade can increase wind speeds by exacerbating air pressure fluctuations between the land and the sea.

"A healthy forest (also) slows down the speed of water until it reaches the ground," Allan Schwarz, founder of the Mezimbite Forest

Centre, a community-based programme that trains people in forest conservation, [told](#) *The New Humanitarian*. "This makes it possible for about 80 percent of the water to get absorbed into the soil... If the forest is lost, water moves faster and is substantially less absorbed."

Much deforestation has been attributed to slash-and-burn agricultural practices, but charcoal and timber production have also contributed. Unfortunately, families affected by the storms may be tempted to resort to expanding charcoal production in an effort to make ends meet.

"We know that chopping trees is bad for our fields, but at the moment it is the only way to have a possible income in the weeks to come," [said](#) Raymundo Bartolomeu, whose crops were among those destroyed by Cyclone Idai.

Communities across the region have come together to respond to the disaster, and faith communities have played a key role. The Igreja Presbiteriana de Moçambique posted an appeal for goods and non-perishables on its [Facebook page](#). Both the Presbytery of Zimbabwe of the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (UPCSA) and the Harare Synod of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) issued statements immediately after Cyclone Idai struck eastern Zimbabwe calling on their congregations to offer prayerful response. The UPCSA affirmed "the united ecumenical, inter-faith, and diverse efforts that are already taking place in the country to send aid" to those affected by the storm.

In Mutare, the closest city to Chimanimani that was not badly affected by Cyclone Idai, UPCSA pastor Rev. Everisto Musedza worked with Miracle Missions, based at Highlands Presbyterian Church in Harare, to distribute more than 51 truckloads of relief supplies, five of which went to Mozambique.

One thousand people worked at St. Columba's Presbyterian Church to sew soap, candles, food

and blankets into sacks that were airlifted to families.

Rev. Musedza [said](#) the response was overwhelming. “We saw all walks of life contribute, across all faiths. From the elite to the poorest, people arrived to offer their services, saying, ‘Here I am, where do you want me?’ ... My hope is that we can build on this unity.”



Rev. Everisto Musedza
Photo by: Ashraf Hendricks, [GroundUp](#)

Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA) also issued an [urgent appeal](#) and has been [working](#) with ACT Alliance, a coalition of 151 churches and faith-based organizations working around the world to respond to emergencies and build resilience. As rescue turns to recovery, [donations](#) to PDA’s Southern Africa appeal will enable the agency to explore ways to help partners in the region to improve conditions and promote disaster preparedness.