

Thousands feared dead as Indian Ocean cyclone Chido devastates Mayotte

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Thousands are feared dead after Cyclone Chido on Saturday struck Mayotte, a part of the Comoro island chain located between Madagascar and Mozambique but ruled by France. The storm's 220km/h winds felled trees and tore apart fragile sheet metal houses that make up 40 percent of Mayotte's housing.

Hundreds of thousands of people in Mayotte now face famine and disease, largely cut off from outside assistance. Most of the barges that link the different islands in the archipelago have been destroyed or damaged, roads are blocked by fallen trees or other debris, and hospitals and many grocery stores are partially or totally closed.

President Emmanuel Macron will arrive in Mayotte today, as French authorities continue to delay any estimate of the scale of the disaster. "I think there will certainly be several hundred dead, maybe we will get close to a thousand, or even several thousand" deaths, said Mayotte police prefect François-Xavier Bieuville. He blamed the lack of clear figures on Muslim tradition, which he said requires burial "at most 24 hours after death."

The horrific toll from the cyclone is due above all to the French government's fascistic hostility to Mayotte's population, half of whom are undocumented Comoran immigrants. Mayotte, France's poorest department, had a 77 percent poverty rate and a 37 percent unemployment rate before the storm. When the lack of electricity, clean water and safe housing provoked protests, Paris responded with far-right calls to stop immigration from the Comoros to France through Mayotte.

This malign neglect has led to disaster, as storms intensified by global warming hit a population lacking basic protections from a cyclone. The death toll may well reach into the tens of thousands.

Many undocumented workers did not go to shelters to avoid capture by police. Zaidou Tavandy, a member of the crisis team set up in the capital, Mamoudzou, said: "When the cyclone hit, 3,000 people came to the shelters opened by the city, whereas the population of the capital numbers around 90,000 inhabitants, half of whom are undocumented. Where have all the people gone who no longer have a roof over their heads?"

Mayotte Senator Saïd Omar Oili said, "This is the greatest natural catastrophe in France since the eruption of Mount Pelée in 1902 in Martinique, which killed 30,000 people. ... The rumors, in the hospitals, say 20,000 dead. Just in La Vigie [a Mamoudzou slum] there must be several thousand."

"On the hills, just a few days ago, there were hundreds of houses. They have all been razed to the ground," said Abacar, a resident of Mamoudzou. Many kwassa-kwassa boats that could have been used for transport from Mamoudzou, where the bulk of Mayotte's population lives, were confiscated by police as part of anti-migrant operations and stored in a vulnerable garage, Abacar added: "They were all shattered during the storm."

"Help has to arrive fast. Here, in four days, there will no more to eat," said Youssouf Bacar, a resident of Dzaoudzi, the Small Island on which Mamoudzou and Mayotte's airport are located. "Up until now, everyone has managed to get by, but what about in a few days? Without electricity, frozen food will no longer be edible starting tomorrow. So there are no more reserves. And we are not seeing anything coming in."

Bacar said he had heard and seen nothing of rescue operations initiated by the French government, which will send an A-400M military transport plane with 23 tons of food and water from the French island of Réunion, 1,400 kilometers away. With internet largely

cut off, Bacar said, “I only learned this morning that three government ministers had visited before.”

There are growing fears that, after a cholera epidemic earlier this year, Mayotte could see a new surge of diseases due to lack of clean drinking water, including cholera and typhoid fever.

Overseas Territory Minister François-Noël Buffet had headed an official delegation to Mayotte and gave a brief speech to a group of soldiers and military police. “Everything is a priority,” he said, stressing the need “to hold on in the next eight days.” Buffet claimed that “only 72 hours have passed since the catastrophe” and “our mobilization is already gigantic.”

French military police are imposing a 10 p.m. to 4 a.m. curfew, ostensibly to prevent looting by Mayotte’s starving inhabitants, but food and water were only starting to be distributed yesterday.

Emergency workers are still scrambling to restore basic services. The French Interior Ministry reported that commercial flights cannot land in Mayotte’s airport, that 80 percent of the cell phone network is down, and that water would only be restored to half of Mayotte’s housing in 48 hours. It said that in Mayotte’s hospitals, “there is 40 to 45 percent of activity that is gradually coming back online.”

French imperialism has for decades pursued a neocolonial policy in Mayotte, valuing it for the naval base at Dzaoudzi but treating its population with barely-disguised hostility.

Mayotte was purchased by French King Louis Philippe from Mayotte Sultan Andriantsoly in 1841, seven years before Louis Philippe’s overthrow in the 1848 revolution. After all the Comoro islands were given to France at the 1885 Berlin conference that carved up Africa, Mayotte was hit by two horrific cyclones, then an earthquake and a smallpox epidemic in 1898. Administered by French colonial authorities in Madagascar, Mayotte was reattached to the Comoros at Madagascar’s independence in 1960. Mayotte voted to remain French when the Comoros voted for independence in 1974.

In 2017, the first year of his presidency, Macron created an international incident by callously mocking the deaths of Comorans who, in the 1990s, had begun emigrating to Mayotte on kwassa-kwassa boats. A 2012 French Senate report had found that in the previous 20 years, between 7,000 and 10,000 Comorans had died by

drowning trying to reach Mayotte. “Kwassa-kwassas don’t do much fishing, they catch Comorans. That’s different,” Macron said.

Macron tried to calm the outrage he had provoked in the Comoros by pledging to work with the Comoran government to limit drownings, but Paris promptly violated this pledge. Under Macron, French naval operations in the region increasingly focused on preventing Comorans from reaching Mayotte, while Mayotte police launched waves of mass arrests of Comorans for deportation.

France’s refusal to invest the funds necessary to build basic infrastructure and public services was graphically exposed in the Macron administration’s 2019 decision to contract out the building of water infrastructure to the Vinci corporation. The deal collapsed last year amid protests in Mayotte, when Vinci said it did not have the necessary resources for the project. The European Union, which had partially financed it, investigated Vinci and found that at least €685,000 had been embezzled.

French policy towards Mayotte is increasingly set by the fascistic, police-state policies that shape all of official French politics. At the beginning of this year, far-right Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin proposed to revoke birthright citizenship in Mayotte to discourage Comoran immigration.

France’s current caretaker Interior Minister, the monarchist Bruno Retailleau, responded to Cyclone Chido by pledging to fight “legal and above all illegal immigration.” He threatened, “We cannot rebuild Mayotte without dealing with the migration issue with the greatest determination. Mayotte is the symbol of the laxness that governments have allowed to emerge on this issue. We will have to pass laws so that in Mayotte, as across all our national territory, France takes back control of its immigration.”

This combination of wilful neglect of basic social need and fascistic police-state terror created conditions in which thousands, and possibly tens of thousands, needlessly died in Mayotte.



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