

Statement by the President of the Jesuit Conference of Africa and Madagascar (JCAM) on Cyclone Idai

My thoughts are with the hundreds of thousands in Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Malawi who have been affected by Cyclone Idai over the past week. The devastation this storm has caused deserves the attention and support of the international community to rebuild. I'm encouraged by the level of humanitarian assistance to the affected countries.

The Jesuits in Africa and Madagascar join the rest of Africa and the world in mourning the loss, interruption and destruction of lives and livelihoods caused by Cyclone Idai. The scale of devastation it caused is enormous. 90% of the city of Beira is reported to have been destroyed, floods have wiped out entire villages, key infrastructure such as roads, hospitals, schools, have been destroyed; one St Charles Lwanga Catholic School in Chimanimani in Zimbabwe was buried by a mudslide, causing the death of some students. The devastation has made the affected areas difficult to access, hampering aid efforts by individuals and organisations. The scale of the destruction can thus only be fully ascertained later once these communities are accessible.

The real devastation, however, is the lives that have been lost. As of 22 March, the death toll is reported to have surpassed 500 across the three countries. This number is expected to rise as water recedes and more bodies are discovered and retrieved. The Cyclone has affected about 1,7 million people in the three countries, who stand in need of humanitarian aid.

We are in close solidarity with the communities that have been affected. The Jesuits in Zimbabwe, Mozambique, South Africa, Zambia and Malawi have already initiated campaigns and appeals to raise resources needed to bring relief to these communities. The Jesuit Relief Fund of the Zimbabwe-Mozambique Province has already managed to send the first batch of aid they have gathered so far within Zimbabwe. This comprises clothes, non-perishable food and blankets. This has been sent to Chimanimani, the worst affected area in Zimbabwe, through the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP) of that area's diocese. More aid in cash and kind is still being gathered in Zimbabwe and South Africa and from further afar. It is encouraging that alumni of Jesuit schools within Zimbabwe who are based abroad have been forthcoming and supportive through offering cash donations. The response to the plight of the affected people, especially within Catholic circles, has been overwhelming. Such moments help us restore our faith in humanity.

However, disasters such as this one need not awaken only our sympathy towards humanity, but also our sympathy towards our planet, to God's creation itself. As humanity, we need to respond to the distress of our planet. Global increase in adverse and calamitous weather conditions is a manifestation of climate change, which we humans are largely responsible for. While the poor are the least responsible for global warming and environmental degradation, it is them who bear the brunt of its effects. Caring for our Home is the surest way of preventing the frequent occurrence of such disasters and of taming their severity. Humanity needs to undergo an ecological conversion spoken of by Pope Francis in his encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si*. Let us especially use this time of Lent to help those in need in Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Malawi in whatever means possible, as individuals, communities and organisations. Even the smallest of gestures can bring hope to those who have no reason to have any given these circumstances.

God bless you all,

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President of the Jesuit Conference of Africa and Madagascar