

FEATURE STORY

Malawi church responds to cyclone disaster

Amid a rising death toll, hundreds missing, and concerns over slow rescue services in Malawi's cyclone disaster, the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) is appealing for support to aid populations affected by the weather phenomenon.

Image

A worker labors on a tea plantation in near Thyolo, in southern Malawi, as the sun rises through early morning fog.

Photo:
Paul Jeffrey/Life on Earth

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Humanitarian aid

Since striking on 11 March, the deadly storm has killed over 200 people and injured more than 700, according to the Malawi government's Department of Disaster Management Affairs. More people are believed to be trapped in mudslides and flooding in the storm that battered 13 districts in the country's south.

The church's Blantyre Synod said it was directly affected since all the districts wracked by the storm were under its jurisdiction, as it expressed deep sadness over the occurrence.

"The synod is mourning with those that have lost their loved ones and we pray for those who have been affected by the cyclone," said Rev. Dr Billy Gama, general secretary of Blantyre Synod of the church said in a statement.

One of the longest and deadliest cyclones to hit Africa in recent times, Tropical Cyclone Freddy made a first landfall in Southern Africa in late February. Over the weekend into Monday it struck for a second time, tearing through Madagascar, Mozambique, and Malawi.

The storm swept away roads and bridges, flattened homes, and destroyed farmlands. It also damaged telecommunication and related infrastructure, frustrating rescue and humanitarian efforts.

Against this backdrop, the church has moved to the frontline. It has established a special committee to handle issues related to the disaster, is mobilizing humanitarian aid through the churches, and has opened up church buildings to shelter the displaced persons, among other actions.

“The CCAP Blantyre Synod commends the government, religious bodies, civil societies, and all Malawians of good will who have started reaching out to our brothers and sisters,” said the church leader.

On 16 March, Gama joined Lazarus Chakwera, president of the Republic of Malawi, in a visit to some sites where some survivors are sheltering. They also visited the hospital where some of the injured survivors are being treated.

“The injuries are more scarring than what I thought,” Gama said. “From the hospital we went to Mulanje, Limbali, and Muloza...(areas) where we just learnt that over 70 dead bodies were being found. Over nine villages were washed away; this means more bodies will be discovered.”

Gama said the church was appealing to individuals and professionals to reach out to the affected families and offer psycho-social support in addition to financial and material aid. It is also appealing to the local and international community to help the synod mobilize more support either in cash or kind.

“Let us hold our hands together regardless of our religious, political, and tribal affiliations in supporting our brothers and sisters during this difficult time,” appealed Gama.

On 15 March, President Chakwera declared a 14-day mourning period, as his government pledged US\$1.5 million in assistance. At least 20,000 people have been displaced in the disaster, largely blamed on the global climate change crisis.