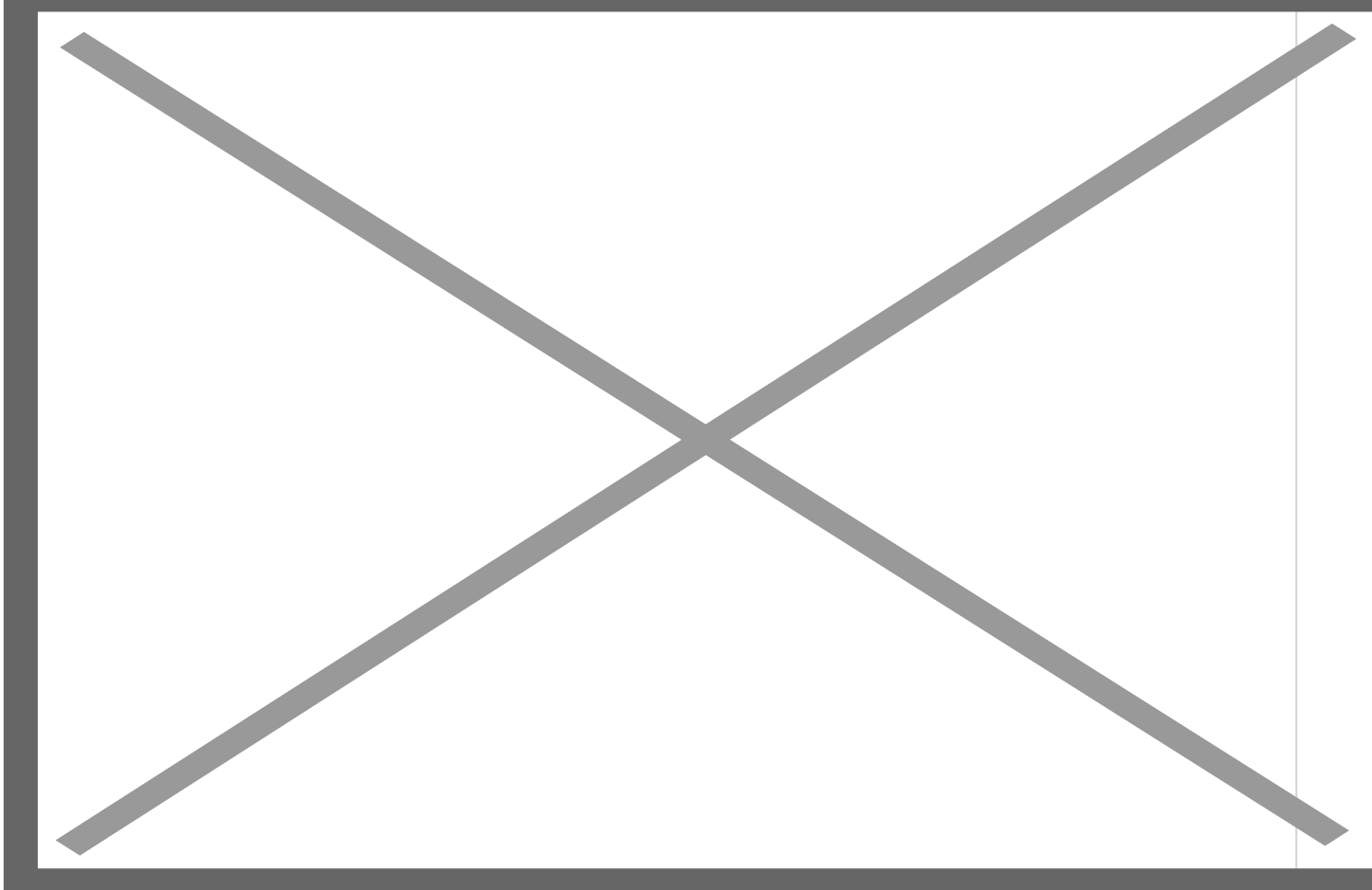


Cyclone Freddy death toll in Malawi and Mozambique passes 100

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With bare hands, Malawians dig through mud for survivors; Mozambique officials say fallout from the storm's second landfall was worse than expected.

Maputo, March 14 (RHC)-- More than 100 people have been killed in Malawi and Mozambique after Cyclone Freddy, packing powerful winds and torrential rain, returned to Southern Africa's mainland.

Freddy barrelled through Southern Africa at the weekend for the second time in a few weeks, making a comeback after it first hit in late February.

Malawi bore the brunt, counting at least 99 deaths after mudslides overnight washed away houses and sleeping occupants. Another 134 people were injured and 16 are reported missing. Malawi's commercial capital Blantyre recorded 85 deaths. "We expect the number to rise," Charles Kalemba, a commissioner at the Department of Disaster Management Affairs, told a press conference.

In neighbouring Mozambique, at least 10 people died and 14 were wounded. The Mozambique National Institute for Disaster Management said the fallout from the storm's second landfall in the country was worse than expected.

According to the UN's World Meteorological Organization, Freddy, which formed off northwestern Australia in the first week of February, was set to become what is believed to be the longest lasting tropical cyclone on record. It crossed the entire southern Indian Ocean and blasted Madagascar from February 21 before reaching Mozambique on February 24.

Following what meteorologists describe as a "rare" loop trajectory, Freddy then headed back towards Madagascar before moving once more towards Mozambique.

The last cyclones to cross the entire southern Indian Ocean were Leon-Eline and Hudah in 2000.

The UN said more than 11,000 people were affected by the storm. The impact of the cyclone has piled more woes on Malawi, a country grappling with the deadliest cholera outbreak in its history, which has killed more than 1,600 people since last year.

President Lazarus Chakwera declared a "state of disaster in the Southern region" of the nation. The government was responding to the crisis while appealing for local and international aid for affected families, his office said.

Schools in 10 southern districts will remain closed until Wednesday, with rains and winds expected to keep battering the nation's south. National carrier Malawi Airlines said all flights to Blantyre have been cancelled until further notice after an inbound plane ran into the bad weather and was forced back to the capital, Lilongwe.

The country's energy utility also warned that electricity generation would be unstable, as it would have to temporarily shut down hydropower stations to prevent muddy water from damaging turbines. Armed with shovels or just their bare hands, residents of the southern Malawi township of Chilobwe were digging through the mud, hoping to find survivors as the torrential rain unleashed by Cyclone Freddy poured on their backs.

Government rescuers were late to arrive, said one resident refusing to give his name, covered in mud, as he helped with the rescue effort. "The people are overwhelmed. The situation is very difficult," said ambulance driver Honest Chirwa, adding rescuers lacked adequate equipment.

The impoverished township has been hit hard by the powerful storm, which triggered flooding and mudslides that swept away homes and buried their inhabitants.



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