

Geneva & Maputo, March 1, 2000

Yesterday ACT aid workers flew over some of the worst-flooded parts of Mozambique. Following are their eye-witness accounts of that trip. The intention of the flight was to see and assess the damage created by the flooding of the Limpopo in Gaza province.

«We flew from Maputo by the coast to Zongwane, the mouth of the Limpopo, to Xai Xai, to villages and small towns along the Limpopo: Chibuto, Mohamed, Chilembene, Leonde and Chokwe. From there we mostly followed the road to Maputo via Mupapa and Marcia,» explains Philip Wijmans of ACT-Lutheran World Federation.

Mr. Wijmans continues: «At Zongwane, so many houses are flooded, dead animals can be found in the swollen waters, remains of local-type houses and so many things we could not even distinguish.»

«The town of Xai Xai is a shock. Most of the town is flooded, sometimes up to the third floor of a historic building. People live with their goods on the roofs. Some people have been evacuated. Others are stranded on the Limpopo Bridge.»

Ulla Hauer, ACT consultant and employee of the Danish NGO IBIS, adds: «At Xai Xai, the Limpopo River has taken on the appearance of a huge lake, swallowing everything around its original course. Only radio masts and a few higher buildings rise above the water masses. Entire neighborhoods and thousands of huts have disappeared. Bits and pieces of roofing and other building materials float around in the muddy waters. The big bridge at Xai Xai is still intact, but the road leading to the bridge is flooded on both sides, leaving people and vehicles stranded on the bridge.» Ulla Hauer continues: «People have sought refuge on the roofs of churches and houses. Some wave to us asking that we pick them up.»

The helicopter chartered by ACT-LWF for this assessment mission was small, with no rescue gear, and could not pick up any of the stranded people. That task is currently left to only eight South African helicopter crews - obviously far short of the need as it is estimated that at least 100,000 people are in need of urgent evacuation. By yesterday, the SA Air crews had moved approximately 6,000 people. From the onwards trip along what was once the Limpopo River, Ulla Hauer explains: «Towns and villages are all under water. Tankers, train wagons, cars and bicycles - everything is like frozen were it got stuck. In Chokwe - the largest city in Gaza Province - houses, offices and food stores are flooded with all the consequences which follows from that.»

«In Chokwe, the LWF office is completely flooded,» says Philip Wijman. He goes on: «Some few people can be seen returning to the city, or are lingering around not knowing what to do. But the expectation by the specialists is that there will be more waves coming in, even worse than the one that hit Chokwe Sunday morning 02.00. It is extremely dangerous to return at this time. We only see very few people!»

The World Food Program has indicated that in Gaza alone 75,000 people still need to be evacuated. Another 30,000 from Sofala and Inhambane. One can therefore assume that more than 100,000 people have been directly made homeless by the waters or are in extreme danger to lose their homes and belongings.

«Regarding the economy, or families losing their crops and cattle, the figure of 800,000 people affected is a conservative estimate. The entire country is affected one way or another, least that the growing economy will stagnate. Everything went from development back to emergency again, for the country and for agencies like ours too,» concludes Philip Wijmans.