News
EarthBeat
A Malagasy family is pictured outside their destroyed home Feb. 8, 2022, in Mananjary, Mada

A Malagasy family is pictured outside their destroyed home Feb. 8, 2022, in Mananjary, Madagascar, in the aftermath of Cyclone Batsirai. (CNS/courtesy CRS)

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Everybody on Madagascar's east coast has a story about the night Cyclone Batsirai struck and is terrified for the next intense storm, said Madagascar country representative for Catholic Relief Services.

"One woman I spoke with had left her house at 4 o'clock in the morning to run and gather the corrugated-iron" sheets of her roof that had blown away, Carla Fajardo, CRS country representative, told Catholic News Service Feb. 15. "She then got straight to work nailing them back on," with 20 people taking refuge in her home, "most of them in one room."

People in the east coast city of Mananjary said "they had never before been in the eye of a storm as severe as this," Fajardo said on her return to the capital, Antananarivo, after five days of travel to assess needs.

Flooded homes in Vohipeno, Madagascar, are pictured in an aerial view Feb. 7, 2022, in the a

Flooded homes in Vohipeno, Madagascar, are pictured in an aerial view Feb. 7, 2022, in the aftermath of Cyclone Batsirai. (CNS/CRS/Miguel Rasolofo)

"A 76-year-old man said he'd never seen anything like it. He told me that night (Feb. 5) was the longest night of his life, watching trees fall one after another," she said.

People's vanilla and cinnamon businesses were wiped out along with the trees, Fajardo said, noting that the vast majority of homesteads in Mandalay and surrounding areas have been destroyed. While plots are small, people work in cooperatives and sell their produce in bulk, she said.

The cyclone left about 120 people dead, mainly in the Ikongo district, also near the east coast. Many houses that district are made of clay and disintegrated in the floods, Fajardo said.

The east of Madagascar "is lush; it is the country's breadbasket and known for its vanilla, cinnamon, cocoa, bananas" and other spices and fruits, Fajardo said. "It always has rain," unlike the extremely poor drought-stricken south of the Indian Ocean island nation, she said.

"So much production happens" in the east, she said, noting that as well as growing food, people make clothes and other products.

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"The wind swept everything away," Fajardo said, noting that plots where trees and rice had grown are now bare. She said she saw beach sand nearly a mile inland from the ocean.

After Batsirai, distributing food with other organizations is a priority for Catholic Relief Services, as well as helping people to clear up their land and homes, Fajardo said. "We have more than 30 staff" in the affected areas "whose homes have been destroyed, yet they are still working," she said.

"I heard someone say, 'We are so hungry we could eat each other,'" Fajardo said, noting that many people had eaten nothing for about five days after the cyclone hit.

Flooded homes in Mananjary, Madagascar, are pictured Feb. 7, 2022, in the aftermath of Cycl

Flooded homes in Mananjary, Madagascar, are pictured Feb. 7, 2022, in the aftermath of Cyclone Batsirai. (CNS/CRS/Miguel Rasolofo)

Mananjary's public hospital "is no longer functioning, five health centers are completely destroyed in the area and the roofs of 35 other structures have been blown off," Doctors Without Borders said in a Feb. 11 statement. "The hospital patients have been evacuated to a clinic opened urgently to receive them."

Electricity in Mananjary had not been restored by mid-February, Fajardo said. Despite this and other difficulties, "people are rushing to put their lives back together," she said, noting that nails being hammered into roofs was the most prominent sound in Mananjary when she arrived.

People work together to help each other, she said, noting that a woman who lost all the materials for her coffee stall has been given space to sell at the market by a neighbor whose stall is intact.

"We are so scared" of more cyclones, which have been predicted, Fajardo said, noting that global warming has increased the risk of deadly tropical storms.

In late January, a tropical storm killed about 60 people, mostly in Antananarivo, and affected 131,000 people across Madagascar. It also hit Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe, causing dozens of deaths.

Madagascar is one of the poorest countries in the world. Some 42% of children suffer from chronic malnutrition, even without a natural disaster.