

Report on working visit, June 2019

On 3 June, I landed at Beira airport for the 41st time. We had been told to expect extensive damage as a result of Cyclone Idai, but nothing could have prepared us for the heartrending devastation that met our eyes.

Not a single house had been left untouched. Poor and rich alike had been dealt a severe blow. In the slums, the corrugated iron houses had disappeared altogether. Rooves and windows had been torn from other recently renovated homes. Trees had been uprooted, their branches snapped off like matchsticks. The roads had been damaged; electricity cables had been torn down. We had arrived in a city hit hard by Idai. And it had hit the hinterland even harder.



The badly damaged Faculty of Medicine

We started listening to the dreadful stories told by people who experienced the storm first-hand. Everyone was terrified and in shock. Nobody had experienced anything like it before. Nor had they realised that the storm was on its way, despite media warnings. They couldn't believe it. Around 6 p.m. the wind started blowing hard. The gusts were so strong that it was difficult to stand up straight. They got even stronger in the course of the evening and started tearing off rooves and uprooting trees. The storm peaked at around 2 a.m., with winds of 250 km per hour. Everything was shaking. Then, a deadly silence fell. Everyone thought it was over, but less than 30 minutes later the wind started blowing from the opposite direction, stronger than ever, and it was then that the most damage was done.

Next day, the devastation was unmeasurable. Roads looked more like sand dunes, trees and electricity poles lay everywhere, cars and houses had been destroyed. As my household help put it, the city had been turned into a refuse heap. In the hinterland, people had not been warned that the dam in Zimbabwe was about to burst. The water swept through the villages, destroying everything in its wake. Lamego disappeared completely, and an estimated 3000 of her inhabitants were drowned. In the first few days following the cyclone, people were in shock, not knowing whether friends and family members elsewhere in the country were alive or dead. There was no electricity no water, no telephone. Shops lay in ruins and any food that was still available doubled in price.

As the initial shock subsided, everyone who was able set to work, doing all they could to make roads accessible again. It still took months to restore water and electricity supplies to all the neighbourhoods. Meanwhile, international aid started arriving, supplying food, clean water, tents and vaccinations against cholera. After about 10 days, a degree of phone contact was re-established.

In other newsletters on this website, you can read about the help we were able to give our students during this crisis period.

Gitta van der Meeren,