Cyclone Idai and Team Rubicon: When the Support Comes Full Circle

Patricia Weems, MD

In early March 2019, Southeast Africa was saturated by rainfall from an unnamed tropical system. That same system would soon make a fateful turn back into the warm waters of the Mozambique Canal where it would strengthen into an intense tropical cyclone, earning a name for itself that generations of locals will not soon forget: Cyclone Idai. This Category 2 storm made landfall near Beira, Mozambique in the early morning hours of March 15. The damage from winds and storm surge was devastating to the coastal city of over 500 000, but the flooding throughout Mozambique, Malawi, Zimbabwe, and Madagascar was catastrophic. The confirmed death toll now sits at close to 1000 and an estimated 3 million people were left in need of assistance.

Back in the United States, members of Team Rubicon began making efforts to send much needed relief to the affected areas. Team Rubicon is an international NGO that started in 2010 after two former US Marines mobilized a small team of medical professionals to respond to the devastating earthquake in Port-au-Prince. Their military training made them valuable to the operation, but that operation in turn gave them a renewed sense of purpose. With a mission to get aid on the ground quickly and a passion for helping other veterans discover their resolve, Team Rubicon expanded and now has over 90 000 volunteers. They operate both in the US and internationally and, in June 2018, became the first NGO from the Western hemisphere to earn the WHO's verification as a Type 1 Mobile Emergency Medical Team.

Team Rubicon forward deployed to South Africa their first wave of 13 volunteers, including physicians, nurses, medics, and WASH specialists, on March 23 and was one of the first NGO's on the ground delivering medical care. The TR mobile units initially worked in an "accommodation" camp housing over 500 IDPs close to Beira followed by a more remote task inland to evaluate thousands of villagers cut off by flooding. Within days, the team saw hundreds of patients. Wounds were cleaned, respiratory illnesses were treated, and malaria and cholera quickly became rampant. The spread of these diseases was not surprising in the conditions that the cyclone left Mozambique. What prevailed, and what continues to earn the admiration of both newcomers and seasoned humanitarians alike, was the resilience and solidarity of the local people. In the most dire conditions patients politely formed lines, brought their sickest neighbors to be seen first, helped transport children to local hospitals, and thanked us even in times when we could only offer limited care. The less fortunate helped the lesser fortunate. Despite losing his crops, one farmer asked his friends and family to help the more desperate villagers across the river. A short time later, they had delivered three weeks' supply of food and water, along with shelter and seeds, to over 8000 people.

Team Rubicon and other international relief organizations continue to provide much needed aid, but not without local support. While Cyclone Idai caused significant suffering and structural damage to Mozambique, the community it left behind is proving to be more buoyant than the floodwaters they faced. They have found a renewed sense of purpose in helping others help them, a familiar sentiment to those original members of Team Rubicon.

About the Authors

Team Rubicon, Medical Team Leader, Operational & Disaster Medicine Fellow, Department of Emergency Medicine, Atrium Health – Carolinas Medical Center, Charlotte, North Carolina.

Correspondence and reprint requests to Patricia Weems, MD, Team Rubicon, Medical Team Leader, Operational & Disaster Medicine Fellow, Department of Emergency Medicine, Atrium Health – Carolinas Medical Center, 1000 Blythe Blvd, Charlotte, NC 28203; e-mail: abbyweems@gmail.com

Copyright © 2019 Society for Disaster Medicine and Public Health, Inc. DOI: 10.1017/dmp.2019.68

https://doi.org/10.1017/dmp.2019.68 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Cover Images:



Dr. Weems on site in Mozambique. Photo by Charl Folscher and Team Rubicon.



A Team Rubicon member attends to children. Photo by Charl Folscher and Team Rubicon.

Additional Images:







Members of Team Rubicon in Mozambique after Cyclone Idai, March 2019. All photos by Charl Folscher and Team Rubicon.

https://doi.org/10.1017/dmp.2019.68 Published online by Cambridge University Press