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Photo Courtesy of Rescue South Africa

Saving Lives in Mozambique

Tropical Cyclone Idai made landfall over Mozambique's city of Beira on March 15, 2019, bringing torrential rain, devastating winds, and severe flooding that killed 603 people and forced up to 400,000 people to flee their homes. Fast-rising flood waters left many stranded on floating debris, across rooftops, and in trees—requiring timely action to save lives.

In 2005, USAID's Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA) supported non-governmental organization Rescue South Africa to launch an urban search and rescue (USAR) train-the-trainer course, bringing USAR teams from Fairfax and Los Angeles county fire departments to train nearly 30 South African firefighters as USAR technicians. From this initial group of trainees, Rescue South Africa has continued its mission to build regional USAR capacity, enabling emergency services organizations to quickly and effectively respond to disasters across sub-Saharan Africa and beyond.

Rescue South Africa was one of the first organizations on the ground in Beira when Cyclone Idai hit. Knowing that timing was critical, Rescue South Africa's team of 15 rescue technicians, life support paramedics, and other staff immediately launched boat and swimmer rescues, saving at least 25



people during the first day of operations. As flood waters rose, the team transitioned to helicopter rescues, pulling people from rooftops and trees. Despite facing immense obstacles, Rescue South Africa worked tirelessly over the next eight days to save as many people as possible. The UN recognized Rescue South Africa's efforts in a letter of commendation. "I have rarely seen such courage and dedication by an NGO," wrote UN Deputy Humanitarian Coordinator for Mozambique Sebastian Rhodes-Stampa. "Their actions saved lives."

Rescue South Africa has trained more than 4,000 emergency services personnel from eight southern African countries through the course that began with USAID/OFDA support. The program has been accredited by the University of Johannesburg, and five universities have incorporated the training into their curriculum for paramedics and rescue practitioners. "None of this would be possible without the support received from USAID," highlighted Ian Scher, Rescue South Africa CEO.

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