

Winged Angels to the Rescue

They call them "The Winged Angels" the men and women of the South African Air Force who rescued thousands and thousands of Mozambicans from the sunken villages these past few weeks.

Men who daringly hung upside down from a hovering helicopter on Thursday and plunged his torso into the churning waters to grab a drowning boy and haul him to safety. Men like the airman who rescued a mother and a baby she had given birth to in a tree. Women like Lieutenant Rene Venter, who pilots a light aircraft from dawn to dusk to get maize and medicine to the flood-ravaged community of the Limpopo River valley.

The eyes of those who looked to the skies for help this week were desperate as they quietly waited. Their work-hardened hands clutched hungry babies, hanging onto rough tree branches for days; their refuge from the killer floods.

The men who came to rescue them often having to "play G-d" -- to decide who to take and who to leave behind. Pitiful sights, like the desperate mother who threw her baby up to an already overloaded helicopter to be rescued.

The fate of this mother is unknown.

The villagers -terrified - few having ridden in a car before - now facing the noise and heat of the whirly-bird's exhaust, allowing themselves to be winched into the air, spinning slowly in the strong arms of a flight engineer at the end of a steel cable.

Precious livestock forced to be left, while one old man defiantly, lovingly, gently, cradled his little dog. Nearby, frightened cows, hooves stuck in deep mud, drowned silently. The bloated bodies of humans, goats and cows bobbing in the water. The stench of the dead unbearable.

One mom spent four-and-a-half days tied to a tree to prevent herself and her baby on her back from being washed away. All this time her four-month old daughter, Ermina, was strapped to her back crying from hunger and thirst. When she was rescued, she scrambled to untie her baby daughter -- only to find that the infant had died.

The role of "angels of mercy" is not one the South African Air Force had always played. Once it transported Renamo rebels for training in their fight against the Mozambican government and dropped special forces soldiers into Maputo for covert missions against the ANC.

This devastation has had one good "spin off" - it has united our people [of all races]. It is heartbreaking that it needed a disaster to do so.

I believe the "official figure" is well over a million. Many hundreds have drowned.

One special miracle story out of many --was the rescuing by one of our South African guys of a young mother and baby born in a tree.

Surrounded by rising flood waters, her family lost, she sat in the tree for four days without food . When the helicopter spotted her --she had just given birth to a baby girl in the tree. Mother and baby are doing well.

Israel and Portugal were amongst the first countries to send aid along with the South Africans. The reason I am mentioning this is because of our connection -- many of the people stranded on roof-tops, trees, and worse, share our [Portuguese] names.

In response to the catastrophic floods that have hit Mozambique and wreaked havoc to its population, the, SA Jewish Board of Deputies, IUA-UCF, Tikken and the SA Israel Chamber of Commerce have joined forces in a powerful and united effort to aid the flood victims. The South African Jewish population has responded generously by loaning trucks and contributing money, medical supplies, clothing and other essential goods.

Five doctors from Israel and twenty-five from the South Africa Jewish community have been flown to Mozambique to assist the victims. Israel has sent tents, medical supplies, blankets, medical personal, food and other aid to flood victims in Mozambique. My concern is especially for our people stranded in remote areas who have resorted to eating rats and grasshoppers.

They have no homes, clothes, blankets, having lost all their meager goods in the floods. The huge medical/health problems that are expected to follow the floods are cholera, viral hepatitis, malaria and meningitis; a few of the dreaded diseases to expect.

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