Rains, Floods Affect Drinking Water for Northern Madagascar
by Lindsay Redifer

A year of heavy rains sounds like a blessing, particularly for people in Madagascar, an incredibly poor country. But too much rain can be a curse; ruining drinking water, flooding villages and washing out roads that lead to help. The people of Maroansetra in Northern Madagascar have all of these problems today thanks to a cyclone that took place almost a month ago.

Cyclone Indlala, a major storm that struck on March 15th, was one of four to hit the island and one of the worst. An estimated 90 people were killed from Indlala alone and over 75 thousand lost their homes. Madagascar had already had four smaller cyclones and was on the way to recovering from these smaller systems, but Indlala threw the situation out of control.

Monsieur Maroa Raphael, President of the village Varingoitra, is one of thousands of Malagasy who depend on rivers and lakes for water. After Indlala, he said that dirty water was the only option.

"There are no wells or pumps here," Raphael explained. "We get our water from the river. After the storm, the water was filthy and making everyone sick."

When a river floods it takes in waste, topsoil and debris. Wood and woodstoves are often ruined which makes boiled water equally hard to get a hold of.

The water treatment Sur'Eau, a light bleach that kills germs in fresh water, can be bought in Madagascar. Bottled water is available, too. But, many villages have to leave home to buy these things, and roads are either impassible or nonexistent.

CARE Madagascar, a Non-Government Organization (NGO), brings food to these tiny villages and wants to include water deliveries. But access is always a problem.

Roland Randroson, a CARE employee who works in Maroansetra, said there's often no road.

"The only way to go to these places is by boat. And sometimes its dangerous," he said.

Randroson was one of a crew of six Malagasy CARE workers thrown from a boat on April 4 just after Indlala had passed. The combination of winds, rains and higher water levels caused by the storm made for enormous waves at the river's mouth, two of which capsized the crew.

The group wanted to visit a village known as Andranofotsy, (White Water), a place that has waited for CARE's help since the storm.

"We still haven't made it out there," Randroson said. He and his coworkers are fine, (everyone had on a lifejacket), but paperwork, supplies and the crew's money were lost.

In the village Ivato resident Claudine Soanera, a 42 year-old mother, happily announced to visiting CARE workers that Ivato has one small source of clean water.

"Everyone can get water from here," she said as she led the way to a small, hidden pool. However, it's very small. When eleven year-old Soaline, (who was unable to spell her last name), jumped in the shallow pool, the water only reached above her ankles. This water is also used for bathing and to give chickens, ducks and cows a place to stop for a drink. All of these visitors add new germs and contaminate the deceptively clear pool.

The village used to depend on the river, but that's no longer an option. With rice fields, cow corrals and debris now swallowed up by the brown, churning water, drinking it is a sure way to get sick.

A swollen river can also rip up riverbanks, normally a great place to plant cassava and cultivate coconuts. Just outside of Maroansetra the trees have been ripped to stumps along the river. The land around them is deep, rutted mud. The dirt and debris now washes into the water little by little, which means bad water will continue to be a problem for a long time.

Raphael hopes private businessmen may be able to help him. He's already seen one entrepreneur start a new water treatment plant start construction just above his home, Varingoitra. But plants and reservoirs take time to build and time is running out.

The village president and others like him are now dependent on aid. CARE continues to help them as much as they can, but thousands need food and water. Even more need education about how to handle this new, precarious situation Idlala has given them. So many have already died, it's still unknown how many of those alive will continue to suffer in Madagascar.