Cyclone Indlala hits Malagasy Rice Farmers Hard
by Lindsay Redifer
Note: Malagasy people are referred to mostly by surnames because many were unable to spell out their family names.

Marielene, a 40 year-old single mother and rice farmer lives inside a small school in a village called Ivato just outside of Maroansetra, a town in North Eastern Madagascar. Her possessions include a straw mat for sleeping and eating, some baskets and her latest harvest-a basket of black, slimy rice. This was what she managed to save after her village was hit by the cyclone Indlala.

"My house was destroyed," she said. "The water came in so quickly." Marielene described the school as "completely full" of people who had abandoned their homes during the cyclone Indlala. The school housed people for the first week after Indlala. Now she, her five year-old daughter Zafy and a neighbor are the only ones left.

Indlala hit on March 15th and worked its way across the island. It's estimated that the flooded river has affected one third of the people surrounding Maraonsetra. Ninety percent of the villages were flooded and the now stagnant water will take a long time to recede. The damage done to the rice is severe and damage from the storm and the floods is still easy to see.

Marielene and the people of Ivato used to live along a low riverbank. Fields were planted just across from the farmers' homes. Now the original Ivato is abandoned. Empty, broken houses wobble on stilts that hold them just above the newly swollen river. And the fields are covered in water.

In the school, Marielene and daughter Zafy say they have trouble sleeping. "Everything is so muddy," Zafy said, wrinkling her nose. Both want a new house, but that means they'll have to pay someone to build it. And money is just too scarce.

The village has since moved up to a higher part of the bank and most of the people have managed to build new houses. At first glance, the new Ivato looks like a small paradise. A quaint collection of small, traditional homes set against lush, forested hills. But the ground is ankle-deep mud, a reminder of just how high the water rose.

Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) CARE and the World Food Program (WFP) have brought Ivato and other small villages emergency stores of food. The organizations were able to provide sacks of rice, peas and vegetable oil to give people enough food until the next harvest.

"I'm very happy to have CARE here," Marielene said. "They helped us today."

Marielene and others like her have no desire to leave or stop farming. Marielene said she will plant again in May but harvest won't happen until October. Also, she doesn't know what affect all this flooding will have on the land. A lot of water seems to be a good thing, but is it?

Angeline, a 50 year-old mother of six and a farmer, said the rice can be tricky. She's salvaged a large basket of rice from a now drowned field. It appears normal, but she knows much of it will have to be thrown out. "I'll have to sort through this to find what's good and what's bad," she said. She explained that if a raw kernel of rice absorbs enough water it spoils and can make a person ill if it's eaten.

"I was very scared seeing the cyclone," Angeline said. "The mud came in higher and higher. I was one of the first to come to the school."

Angeline was one of the many to be organized into food distribution teams in Ivato. Each team has a leader that manages the distribution for the group and makes sure everyone has what they need. The CARE workers who bring the food are also Malagasy and speak the local dialect. CARE's aim is to continue their work in Ivato and places like it so that people there can go back to their quiet way of life and no longer depend on donations.

These small settlements don't have access to roads. While this makes for a more a scenic place to live, it also means getting from home to the doctor, market or even a relative is difficult. Boats are small, wooden canoes called *Lakanas* and are used daily to catch fish and get around. But by nature people from small villages don't travel very much, particularly if there's a farm and a family to care for.

Down the river from Ivato is a village called Rantavobe, where Marie Licia used to have her home. A forty year-old rice farmer and single mother of one, Marie Licia is now living in her mother's house, right next door to what remains of her own.

"I'm very unhealthy," she said, "I have no energy left." On top of bad health this single mom says she has no idea what will happen to her in the near future. Marie Licia said she's lost all her rice and can't say when she'll be able to plant a new crop. She's been to a doctor but can't afford the prescribed medicine. She tries to rest and take it easy, but she has a baby boy to raise and can only sleep so much.

Marie Licia's exhaustion is a result of her having to wade through chest-high, cold, contaminated water to a neighbor's house during the storm. A tributary sprouted off of the river and cut through Rantavobe, coming straight for her house.

"I was sitting with my younger sister. There was a river of water rushing past the house. Then it all started coming in and we had to jump out," she said. Her house is now a naked, twisted frame filled with broken wood from the walls and shredded raffia that had been the roof. In front of the house is a yard of deep, shoe-sucking mud.

CARE has already done some preliminary work in Rantavobe and wants to get some emergency stores of food to the people there. In order to do that, they need to work with the village President and encourage everyone who lives there to fill out forms saying how many people are in each house, what have they lost, what the current state of their fields are.

Food distribution is slow, tedious work. For CARE, small motorboats are the best way to transport food, but they can only carry so much. That means only one or two villages a day will get the stores they need to tide them over until the next harvest. Several preliminary visits have to happen first and everything said or done needs to be recorded. CARE workers aren't giving up, but they have a huge job ahead of them.