

Rubbish dump collapse kills 17 in Mozambique

By Eddie Haywood
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Several hours of torrential rains early Monday triggered the collapse of a refuse dump in Hulene, an impoverished district on the outskirts of Maputo, the capital city of Mozambique, resulting in a 15-meter (49 ft.) tall mountain of rubbish plunging down and burying several homes. Seventeen were killed, including several children, and a number of others were injured.

The heavy rains beginning Sunday night, which continued into the early hours of Monday, caused flooding in various areas of Maputo, making several roads impassable. Multiple schools and businesses suffered flood damage and were closed.

The garbage dump at Hulene is one of the largest refuse disposal sites in Maputo, and, according to the Portuguese news agency Lusa, the dump reached the height of a three-story building. Experiencing extreme poverty, many local residents visit the dump in search of food or items to salvage and sell.

Many homes that were affected by the collapse and flooding were located down the hill from the refuse dump. In describing the destruction of the collapse, Fatima Belchior, a national disaster official, said, “The mountains of garbage collapsed on the houses and many families were still inside these residences.”

Hulene resident Mario Castigo told Voice of America a heart-wrenching account: “I heard people screaming. I was alone, I couldn’t help. The water sliding pushed the trash, and it covered the houses down the hill. It took the lives of families, children.”

Illustrating the contempt of the city government towards the population of Hulene, in the days leading up to the collapse, authorities declared makeshift dwellings in Hulene “illegal structures” and ordered the inhabitants to vacate them immediately. These dwellings, constructed from scavenged materials, are

inhabited by the most severely deprived residents of the city, who can afford no other place to live.

For years, the unsafe conditions posed by the dump site and its threat to public health were well known. Over several years, health workers have issued warnings over the government’s neglect to provide sanitary management at the site, reporting that the emanating fumes and vermin rampant in the refuse heap pose severe hazards to public health.

Residents spoke of their frustration with the government’s neglect of the refuse dump. Maria Huo, whose son was injured by the dump’s collapse and whose home was also partly destroyed, expressed outrage that authorities had failed to safely manage rubbish levels at Hulene.

Underscoring the deprivation experienced by the broader Mozambique population, Huo told the BBC: “I live in this neighbourhood because I have nowhere to go. Had the government told me to go to another place to live, I would have left here.”

Teresa Mangué, a local neighborhood leader in Hulene, voicing her anger over the government’s neglect, declared, “It’s been more than 10 years that the dump should have been closed because it’s full, but they still continue to pile trash on the trash. The consequence is this.”

No doubt fearing a social explosion over its criminal neglect and responsibility, various government officials feigned sympathy for the victims of the dump collapse. They promised to accommodate survivors in temporary housing, make psychological treatment available, and also provide funds for funeral services for the dead.

To this end, the Maputo City Council opened a temporary emergency shelter for survivors. Maputo Municipality’s President, David Simango, cynically declared, “We assume all the responsibilities for the

Hulene accident. We will not try to justify ourselves with the closure or the resettlement, otherwise we would be evading our responsibilities.”

Out of a population of 29 million, more than 60 percent of Mozambicans live in extreme poverty, according to the World Bank. The government has starved the population of funding for even the most vital infrastructure, such as sanitary water facilities, which has resulted in scores of deaths and a scourge of treatable diseases, such as cholera and dysentery. The majority of the population subsists on less than a dollar per day.

The Mozambican masses experience high illiteracy rates, with the education budget starved of funds. HIV prevalence is among the highest on the African continent, at 11.5 percent. Treatable diseases such as malaria are the most common cause of death in Mozambique.

Inflation has skyrocketed in the country over the last two years, which has exacerbated already drastic economic conditions for the masses, who now must pay even higher prices for food and other goods needed for the barest day-to-day existence.

In contrast to the blight of severe poverty experienced by the masses, a corrupt aristocracy occupies the height of Mozambican society. Sitting atop this pinnacle are 50 individuals with assets worth more than \$10 million, who make up Mozambique’s political and business elite class, including former president Armando Guebuza. Guebuza made his fortune when as president he oversaw the sale of state-owned assets to international corporations, which in turn enriched himself and members of his clique.

Discoveries of significant offshore gas reserves were recently announced, with various international oil companies, including British Petroleum (BP) and Exxon Mobil, lining up to hammer out deals with the current corrupt government of President Felipe Nyusi, which predictably awarded these companies contracts to exploit these vast resources.

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