

Macron swears amid furious exchange with cyclone-hit Mayotte islanders

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French president makes remark when confronted by residents still without water after huge storm last week

Macron swears while addressing islanders on cyclone-hit Mayotte - video

Emmanuel Macron swore during a furious exchange with residents of the cyclone-hit islands of Mayotte on Thursday night, telling a jeering crowd in the French territory: "If it wasn't for France, you'd be 10,000 times deeper in shit."

Cyclone Chido [swept through Mayotte](#), which lies between Madagascar and Mozambique, on 14 December, destroying vital infrastructure and flattening many of the tin-roofed shacks that make up its large slums. Almost a week after its worst storm in 90 years, [France's poorest territory](#) still has shortages of water.

Throughout Thursday, the French president was [confronted by angry Mahorais](#) demanding to know why aid had not yet reached them. At one point he told a crowd: "You are happy to be in France. Because if it wasn't France, I tell you, you would be 10,000 times deeper in shit. There is no other place in the Indian Ocean that has received this much help. That's a fact."

On Thursday night, Macron said he was extending his visit to a second day "as a mark of respect, of consideration". He said: "I decided to sleep here because I considered that, given what the population is going through, [leaving the same day could have] installed the idea that we come, we look, we leave."

The heckling continued on Friday. "Seven days and you're not able to give water to the population," one man shouted at Macron as he toured the small community of Tsingoni, on the west coast of Mayotte's main island, Grande-Terre.

"I understand your impatience. You can count on me," Macron responded, saying that water would be distributed at city halls.



In the past, Macron has often got in trouble with off-the-cuff remarks in public that he says are

meant to “tell it like it is” but have come across as insensitive or condescending to many French people, contributing to his sharp drop in popularity over his seven years as president.

Back home, opposition politicians pounced on the comments. The Socialist party leader, Olivier Faure, posted on X: “A president cannot say that. In which other French territory would the president lecture our fellow citizens by asking them to please stop complaining about their tragedy since they are already lucky enough to be French?”

Sébastien Chenu, of the far-right National Rally, said: “I don’t think the president is exactly finding the right words of comfort for our Mayotte compatriots, who, with this kind of expression, always have the feeling of being treated differently.”

The hard-left politician Éric Coquerel said Macron’s comment was “completely undignified”.

The official death toll in Mayotte, at 31, has remained lower than expected, after officials had said they feared thousands could have been killed. Immediate burials, in keeping with Islamic tradition, and the large numbers of undocumented migrants from the nearby Comoros who avoid authorities for fear of being deported, may mean the true number of fatalities is never known.

A satellite image taken on 16 December showing Mamoudzou after Cyclone Chido swept through Mayotte. Photograph: Maxar Technologies/Reuters

The cyclone also killed 73 people in northern Mozambique and 13 in Malawi, according to authorities in the south-east African countries.

Mayotte officially has a population of 320,000, but authorities have said there could be 100,000-200,000 more, most from the Comoros and living in the islands’ slums. Mayotte became a part of [France](#) in 1841 and voted to stay French in 1974, when the Comoros islands chose independence.

Earlier in the week, the French interior minister, Bruno Retailleau, a rightwinger who is vocally anti-immigrant, said Mayotte could not be rebuilt without addressing migration.

In Kaweni, a slum on the edge of the island’s capital, Mamoudzou, Ali Djimoi said eight people who had lived close to him were killed by the cyclone, two of them buried quickly near a mosque.

Mayotte had been “completely abandoned” by the French state, he said. “The water running out the pipes – even if it’s working you can’t drink it, it comes out dirty.”

Macron is facing separate accusations of racism over an alleged comment on problems in hospitals, which his office strongly denied he had made.

According to an article in Le Monde on Wednesday, the French president said during a discussion last year in front of his then health minister, Aurélien Rousseau, that the “problem with emergency care in this country is that it’s filled with people called Mamadou”. Mamadou is a name popular among men originating from Muslim ethnic groups in west Africa.

“The Élysée strongly denies these reported remarks, which were not subjected to any verification by the presidency before publication,” an official in the presidency said.

One of the senior Le Monde reporters behind the story, Ivanne Trippenbach, wrote on X: “Le Monde stands by all of its information.”

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Reuters and Agence France-Presse contributed to this report

P.S.

- The Guardian. Fri 20 Dec 2024 17.24 CET:
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