

Explainer

# Why was French territory of Mayotte so ill-equipped to deal with Cyclone Chido?

Saturday 21 December 2024, by [HENLEY Jon](#) (Date first published: 16 December 2024).

**A brief look at the small Indian Ocean archipelago hit by what local authorities call an ‘immense catastrophe’**

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*Ruins of homes in the aftermath of the Cyclone Chido in Labattoir, Mayotte. Photograph: Chafion Madi/Reuters*

Winds of at least 140mph from Cyclone Chido have [devastated the French overseas département of Mayotte](#), leaving an estimated 100,000 people without shelter or water and hundreds, possibly thousands, dead.

Here is a brief look at the small archipelago – and why it is so ill-equipped to deal with what local authorities have described as “an immense catastrophe”.

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## Geography and population

Mayotte is a French overseas region and *département* located off the south-east coast of Africa, to the east of the Indian Ocean islands of Comoros and about 185 miles (300km) north-west of Madagascar.

Surrounded by a vast coral reef, it is made up of two main islands, Grande-Terre and Petite-Terre, and a number of smaller ones, including Mtsamboro, Mbouzi and Bandrélé. Its land area is 144 sq miles (374 sq km), just over three times the size of the city of Paris.



Unlike Mayotte, the nearby volcanic Comoros islands of Grande Comore, Anjouan and Mohéli declared independence from France in 1975. The latest official estimate puts Mayotte's population at almost 321,000 people.

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## History>

The Comoros archipelago was first settled by Arab seafarers about 1,000 years ago. They brought enslaved people from Africa and established a series of small sultanates on the different islands, which traded with east Africa and Madagascar.

France colonised the islands in 1843, installed major sugar plantations, and extended its influence to formally annex the whole archipelago in 1904. By 1961, growing calls for independence led to a measure of self-rule being granted from Paris.

While the rest of the archipelago was for independence, however, in referendums in 1974 and 1976 the inhabitants of Mayotte voted 63% then 99% to stay French. Grande Comore, Anjouan and Mohéli declared independence in 1975, but Mayotte remained part of France.

Independent Comoros has continued to claim Mayotte ever since but the islands became a *département d'outre-mer* – and France's 101<sup>st</sup> *département* – in 2011.

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## Economy and society

Mayotte is France's poorest *département* and heavily reliant on French financial assistance: according to French government data, 84% of the islanders live below the poverty line and more than 40% survive on less than €160 (£137) a month.

However, it is relatively wealthy compared with Comoros. With French social welfare applying in Mayotte, thousands of Comorians risk their lives every year to make the dangerous sea crossing in search of higher living standards. The influx has caused major tensions.

*Destruction of the Mavadzani shantytown on the hills of the village of Koumgou in Mayotte. In the background, the dwellings built to rehouse part of the shantytown population. Photograph: Lemor David/Abaca/Rex/Shutterstock*

About 40% of dwellings on the islands are shacks made of corrugated sheet metal, 29% of Mayotte's households have no running water, and just over one-third of its working-age inhabitants are unemployed, according to the French national statistics office Insee.

The islands' population – whose average age is 23, compared with 41 for mainland France, while almost half are foreign nationals – has increased more than sixfold in the past half-century and is growing by an estimated 4% a year.

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## **Recent unrest**

In January, the speaker of the French parliament visited Mayotte, sparking weeks of demonstrations and violence over gang activity and the migration crisis.

The islands recently suffered their worst drought since 1997, further fuelling residents' anger. Many protesters also demanded that residence permits issued to foreigners on Mayotte should be valid for travel to mainland France.

In February, then interior minister Gérald Darmanin [announced a controversial plan](#) to revoke automatic citizenship through birthplace on the islands, arguing it would significantly “reduce the attractiveness” of the archipelago for prospective immigrants.

*French gendarmes pictured in May 2023 stand guard in front of demolished buildings in a shantytown as part of Operation Wuambushu to clear slums. Photograph: Philippe Lopez/AFP/Getty Images*

In April, [Paris launched Operation Wuambushu 2](#), with about 1,700 gendarmes, police officers and soldiers deployed in an 11-week campaign aimed at cracking down on illegal immigration and gang crime and dismantling hundreds of shantytown shacks.

**Jon Henley**

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## **P.S.**

- The Guardian. Mon 16 Dec 2024 14.05 CET:  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/dec/16/everything-you-need-to-know-about-mayotte-the-cy-clone-hit-french-territory>

- Jon Henley's articles in the Guardian:  
<https://www.theguardian.com/profile/jonhenley>

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