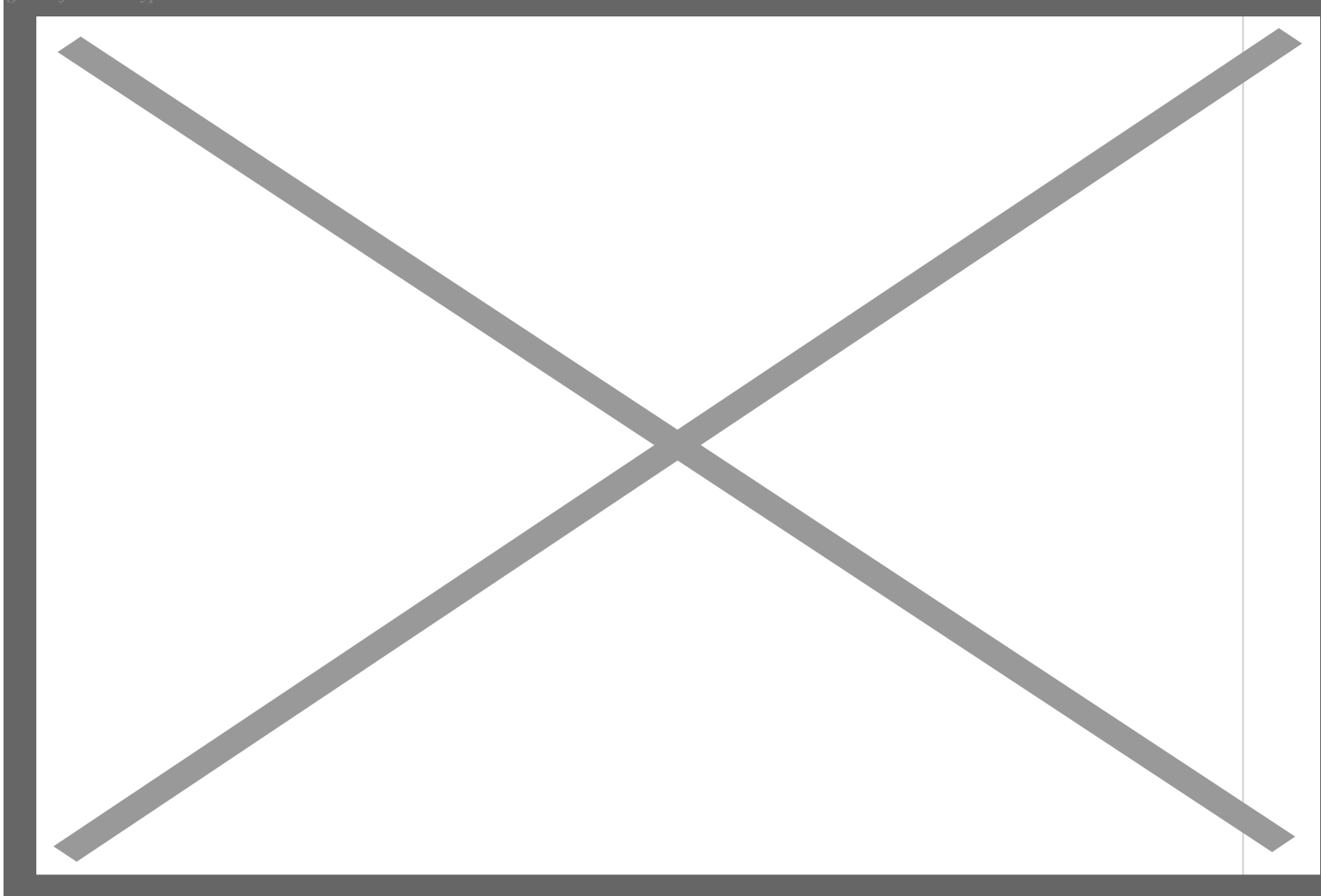


Cyclone Batsirai approaches Madagascar, posing serious threat

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A computer image taken at Meteo-France shows Batsirai, a new tropical cyclone formed over the Indian Ocean [Richard Bouhet/AFP]

Antananarivo, February 5 (RHC)-- Cyclone Batsirai is bearing down on eastern Madagascar, posing a "very serious threat" to millions with strong winds and torrential rains set to batter the large Indian Ocean

island.

Residents hunkered down before the storm's arrival and winds of more than 200 km per hour (124 miles per hour) were forecast as it bore down on the country still recovering from the deadly Tropical Storm Ana in late January.

After passing Mauritius and drenching the French island of La Reunion for two days with torrential rain, Batsirai was about 250km (155 miles) east of Madagascar early on Saturday, the Meteo-France weather agency said.

Batsirai should make landfall between late afternoon and evening on Saturday as an intense tropical cyclone, "presenting a very serious threat to the area", the forecaster said in its morning bulletin.

The eye of the storm was forecast to cross the centre of the island overnight into Sunday, before leaving its western shores by Monday.

Winds could reach "more than 200 or even 250 km/h ... at the point of impact" and waves could reach as high as 15 metres (50 feet), Meteo-France said.

The United Nations said it was ramping up its preparedness with aid agencies, placing rescue aircraft on standby and stockpiling humanitarian supplies. The impact of Batsirai on Madagascar is expected to be "considerable", Jens Laerke, spokesman for the UN's humanitarian organisation OCHA, told reporters in Geneva on Friday.

At least 131,000 people were affected by Ana across Madagascar in late January. At least 58 people were killed, mostly in the capital Antananarivo. The storm also hit Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe, causing dozens of deaths.

The UN's World Food Program (WFP) pointed to estimates from national authorities that some 595,000 people could risk being directly affected by Batsirai, and 150,000 more might be displaced due to new landslides and flooding.

"We are very nervous," Pasqualina Di Sirio, who heads the WFP in Madagascar, told reporters by video link from the Indian Ocean island. Search and rescue teams on the island have been placed on alert and residents reinforced their homes.

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