Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance

DISASTER CASE REPORT

Agency for International Development

Washington D.C. 20523

KENYA - Fire

Data

Date: May 30, 1982 (FY 82)

Location: Lamu, about 150 miles north of Mombasa

No. Dead: 2

No. Affected: 4,000 homeless (approximate)

Damage: 439 houses were destroyed, including much personal property

The Disaster

A fire began before dawn on May 30 in the courtyard of a house in the Lagoni area of Lamu, a coastal town of approximately 15,000 people. Fanned by winds of up to 20 mph, the fire quickly spread from one thatched roof to the next. The fire was finally brought under control when the thatched roofs in its path were removed and when it reached a 20 foot wide street.

The fire ravaged 15-20 percent of the town, destroying 439 houses and leaving approximately 4,000 people homeless. About half of the affected houses were constructed of mud, rock, and cement, and half of concrete coral. All, however, had thatched roofs.

Action Taken by the Government of Kenya (GOK)

The Government of Kenya, local Lamu officials, and the entire community responded quickly to the disaster. A 30-member disaster committee, consisting of local community leaders, the District Public Works Officer, and others, was formed under the direction of the District Commissioner.

This committee was further organized into sub-committees to address specific needs, such as housing, food, labor, and construction. The subcommittees expedited distribution of relief supplies, provided assistance and advice, and organized reconstruction activities.

Efforts to clear the rubble and rebuild began immediately. The homeless were temporarily sheltered in mosques, schools, and other public buildings, as well as in tents provided by the local Red Cross. Some people stayed with relatives and friends, while some preferred to return to their damaged homes, using tarpaulin for protection from the weather. Food supplies were adequate as the local population made large contributions and the GOK supplied emergency stocks.

The local community contributed $30,000 for the disaster victims, and nationwide contributions totaling $200,000 were received.

A thorough assessment of the damage caused by the fire was conducted by the construction subcommittee of the Disaster Committee. Two hundred of the 439 houses burned had to be razed before new construction could begin. Total repair costs were projected by the government to be 25 million shillings (US $2.38 million). In accordance with the recommendation of the Disaster Committee, it was decided that all roofs replaced should be made of noncombustible material, although thatching is preferred in this region because it is cooler.

Of the construction materials needed to repair and rebuild, only sand, mangrove poles, and coral were locally available. Therefore, all other supplies (lumber, metal sheeting, cement) had to be brought from Mombasa. Monsoon floods had earlier washed out the roads on each side of the Tana River, impeding the ferry crossings between Mombassa and Lamu. Although the ferry resumed operation when the river returned to normal levels, the washed out roads remained impassable. As a result, the only viable mode of transportation was by water. One 380-ton capacity dhow was available to make the fourteen hour trip from Mombasa to Lamu. The boat had to be loaded and unloaded by hand, a process which required three to four days at each terminus.

Relief supplies and cash contributions for the Lamu recovery effort were received from all over Kenya for months after the fire. Relief funds were channeled through the President's office to the Coast Provincial Commissioner in Mombasa who then purchased and shipped the supplies to Lamu.

Assistance Provided by the United States Government (USG)

Upon learning of the fire in Lamu and the extent of damage it caused, U.S. Ambassador Harrop on June 4 declared that a disaster warranting external assistance existed in Lamu and made $25,000 available for the relief effort.

On June 8, the American Consul from Mombasa met with the Kenyan District Commissioner, Public Works Officer, and District Officer, and decided that the most beneficial U.S. contribution would be the purchase of lumber and roofing materials. Reports from the District Officer and Public Works Officer identified housing repair and rehabilitation as a relief priority.

The USG purchased 4,423 running meters of 2 x 4 lumber and 8,913 running meters of 2 x 2 lumber at a total cost of ($5,565), as well as 3,522 sheets of 30 gauge corrugated iron roofing in various sizes ($18,555).....$24,120

Transport of the lumber and iron roofing was provided gratis by each supplier from his premises to the old port in Mombasa, where stevedores loaded the goods onto the dhow.....190

TOTAL $24,310

The USG contribution, which was sent from Mombasa on June 24, was the first shipment of relief supplies to arrive in Lamu. Transportation costs from Mombasa to Lamu, estimated at $1,400, were paid by the Provincial Commissioner's Office, and unloading and distribution at Lamu were done by volunteers.

On July 30, the American Consul from Mombasa visited Lamu to observe that the USG-provided materials had been used to roof 58 of the 70 houses which had been repaired by that date.

Assistance Provided by U.S. Voluntary Agencies

None reported.

Assistance Provided by the International Community

None reported.