

## An Unnatural Disaster

**I**N OCTOBER 1991, A STORM PACKING WINDS OF 120 MPH with waves cresting 100 feet raged in the north Atlantic. "Satellite photos showed a cyclonic swirl 2,000 miles wide . . . Three quarters of a million square miles were experiencing gale force conditions."

So writes Sebastian Junger in *The Perfect Storm* as he takes us inside this maelstrom to show us both the awesome power of nature and the valiant efforts of man to sustain human life in the face of what one reviewer called the "maw of meteorological hell."

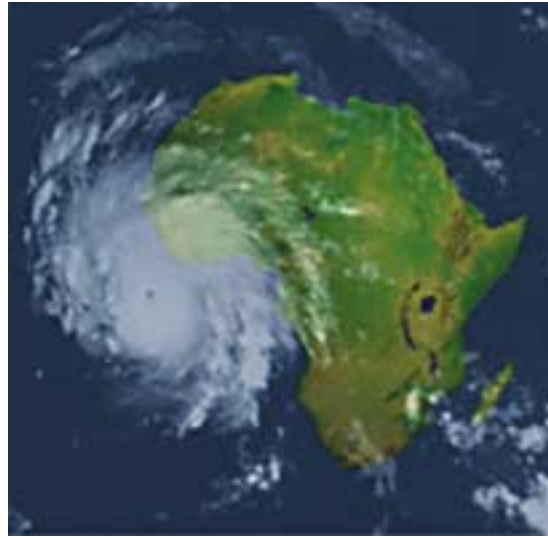
It was that 100-year storm that so many of us along the eastern seaboard fear—coastal residents, emergency workers, government officials, and insurance company executives—because the resulting loss of life and property can be tremendous. But for all its size and potency, this particular storm slipped by relatively unnoticed, even going unnamed by the National Weather Service, because it occurred almost entirely over open seas.

Unnoticed, that is, except by those unexpectedly caught in its grip—like the three crew members of the *Satori*, a 32-foot sloop that had set out under clear skies on October 26, from Portsmouth, N.H., on a course to Bermuda. By the evening of October 29, the *Satori* was trapped in 50-foot seas and had no recourse but to issue a frantic call for help. Almost immediately, emergency resources went to work. Over the next 15 hours, two helicopters, two Falcon jets, a 1,600-ton Coast Guard cutter and 100 airmen and seamen were committed to the rescue.

Judged solely in terms of risk and reward, these efforts seem extravagant. Perhaps something more is at work here. The power of the sea is so immense that if we don't make some effort to resist its fury, we'll have to admit that there are some parts of the physical world beyond man's dominion. And so we train helicopter pilots to fly into the teeth of raging winds and divers to leap from those helicopters into angry seas, and we hope the gods show mercy.

Many East Coast hurricanes originate off the coast of Africa, where a different type of storm is now raging. Like that Atlantic hurricane of 1991, this storm has gone relatively unnoticed until recently. But unlike it, this one has been named, and its name is AIDS.

The statistics are mind-numbing. Already, more



than 12 million are dead, with some 5,000 more dying every day. Every day, the equivalent of a Bhopal-like explosion in terms of lost lives. Every day, the equivalent of 30 Oklahoma City bombings. Twenty-five million sub-Saharan Africans are currently living with the HIV virus. Every day there are 10,000 new infections.

The U.S. Census Bureau projects that AIDS deaths in Africa will exceed 30 million people—a number equivalent to those killed in medieval Europe by the bubonic plague—and that population levels in Africa could be reduced by as many as 70 million people within the next 10 years.

As I said, the statistics are mind-numbing.

In a review published on the Amazon.com website, George Laney commented: "It's like bearing witness to a natural disaster. You're powerless to help, but the awesome spectacle has such emotional appeal that it's nearly impossible to turn away." Laney was referring to an audio version of Junger's book, but he could well have been referring to the African crisis.

The mayday call from Africa has been sounded, but the rescue efforts will require more than helicopters and cutters. We will need to send drugs and educators and medical personnel and vast sums of money into the maw of this biological hell. And we will have to hope that the gods show mercy. ●

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