



# TONGA: VOLCANIC ERUPTION

## Flash Update

As of 16 January 2022

### Situation Overview

A large eruption of the Hunga Tonga Hunga Ha-apai underwater volcano in the evening of 15 January (at 17:26 local time) caused a *tsunami* and ash fall in Tonga (total pop. 105,000 people). The volcanic eruption has continued throughout the day with satellite imagery indicating a 5km wide plume of ash, steam and gas rising into the air 20km above the volcano. The ash plume was observed moving northeast over the islands of Ha'apai and is currently proceeding in a westerly direction away from Tonga.

The eruption was one of the biggest in Tonga in the past 30 years. During the initial eight-minutes, it was so violent it could be heard as "loud thunder sounds" in Fiji, more than 800km away.

In Tonga, a *tsunami* warning was issued. Additional *tsunami* warnings were issued for Fiji, Samoa, and Vanuatu, as well as for Australia, New Zealand and the US. Some of them have been lifted, however, the volcano is still active.

#### **Tonga**

On Saturday at 5:30 p.m., according to Australia's Bureau of Meteorology, a *tsunami* wave of 1.2 metres (about 4 feet) hit the coastline in and around Nuku'alofa causing yet to be detailed damage to buildings and infrastructure. The authorities had earlier urged people to move to higher ground and to protect water sources.

Communications with Tonga are a challenge as regular phone lines are down, the internet cable from Fiji to Tonga seems to have been damaged, and satellite phones are only working intermittently.

Initial information received from Tonga indicates that the main island Tongatapu, with the capital Nuku'alofa, is covered with some 2 cm of ash and there is concern about water accessibility (the government urged people to check their rainwater harvesting systems for ash fall before reconnecting guttering systems and if needed, resort to drinking bottled water) and air quality (government urges population to wear masks).

No injuries or deaths are currently reported but a person is allegedly missing (a member of the coast guard).

OCHA is working to establish lines of communication with Tonga's National Emergency Management Office (NEMO) which is leading the assessment and potential response – in close cooperation with the Tonga Red Cross Society.

#### **Fiji**

A *tsunami* warning was issued for all coastal areas and maritime islands on 15 Jan, 2022, but was cancelled this morning. Villages in Lau, Kadavu, Vanua Levu and parts of the Rewa Delta on Viti Levu reported strong currents, high waves and surges which inundated villages. On the islands of Vatoa and Ono i Lau, which are closer to Tonga than mainland Fiji, villagers reported the presence of volcanic ash.

The islands of Moce, Moala, Kadavu and Taveuni were hit by a low-level *tsunami* which caused some flooding, according to authorities.

Evacuation centres, some of which were still open from when TC Cody hit Fiji last week, were reopened to support those who needed to move to higher ground.

The government is monitoring the air quality as there is a possibility that the ash cloud will move further towards Fiji and the population was advised as a precaution to cover all household water tanks and stay indoors in the event of rain due to the risk of rainfall becoming acidic.

#### **Samoa**

The initial *tsunami* warning issued yesterday was cancelled this morning. However, the *tsunami* advisory still remains due to ongoing volcanic activity in Tonga.

On 15 Jan, 2022, inhabitants of various villages in the Savai'i area were relocated to higher ground. Number of people and villages not yet confirmed. Police and the Samoa Fire and Emergency Services Authority (FESA) assisted.

Some inundations along the coastline reported but initial information indicates no major damage and no loss of life or injuries. The National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) will hold a press conference this afternoon to provide more details.

### Vanuatu

An earlier *tsunami* advisory was discontinued, with the National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) issuing an “all clear”. The office had earlier advised residents to move away from the coastline. Higher waves were experienced in the capital Port Vila, but no damage reported.

### Solomon Islands

A *No Tsunami Threat* message was issued by the Solomon Island Meteorological Service last night. However, it advised that unusual sea currents will be experienced along the coast of Temotu and Makira, Rennell/Bellona and Guadalcanal Provinces.

### **Response**

- The RC a.i. in Fiji (also responsible for Tonga), the Pacific Humanitarian Team (PHT), and OCHA globally are closely monitoring the situation and stand ready to support as needed;
- The Pacific Humanitarian Team - which includes UN agencies, NGO partners, and the Red Cross Movement - stands ready to assist;
- Humanitarian needs are emerging in consultation with government counterparts and partners on the ground;
- Australia and New Zealand are monitoring the situation and ready to provide support on request;
- For other affected countries, only limited damages and no request for assistance received as of now.

Further updates will be provided as situation unfolds.

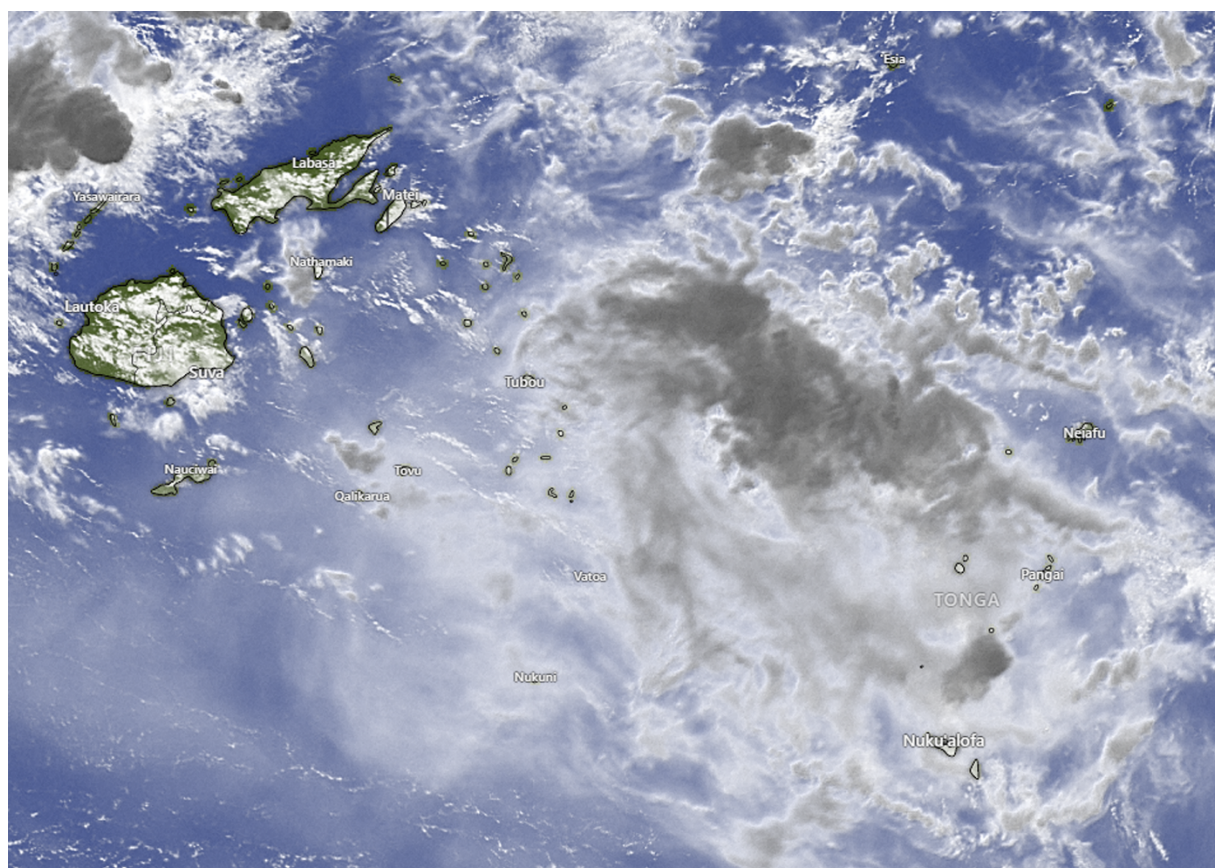


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