



TONGA: VOLCANIC ERUPTION

Flash Update

As of 17 January 2022

Situation Overview

No additional eruptions were recorded since yesterday's update. However, further volcanic activity cannot be ruled out. The ash cloud has slowly moved on in a north-westerly direction. Elsewhere in the Pacific (Fiji, Samoa, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands) *tsunami* warnings have been lifted and no serious impact has been reported so far apart from some limited flooding.

In **Fiji**, the government is monitoring the air quality as there is a possibility that the ash cloud will move further towards the country. 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.

For **Tonga**, the *tsunami* of Saturday has caused yet to be detailed damage of buildings and infrastructure. Nuku'alofa, Tonga's capital, is covered with a two-centimetre-thick layer of volcanic ash and dust. However, the situation in the city is calm and stable and first clean-up efforts are being made. Nuku'alofa's waterfront is seriously damaged with rocks and debris pushed inland by the *tsunami*. Overall, there appears to be significant infrastructural damage around Tongatapu, the main island. There had been no contact from the Ha'apai Group of islands with particular concern about two small low-lying islands – Mango and Fonoi. An active distress beacon had been detected from Mango. New Zealand and Australia carried out surveillance flight today and the latter reported substantial property damage at the western beaches region. In addition, the Tongan Maritime Force, the country's navy, deployed to the Ha'apai Group of islands yesterday.

There is also extensive damage reported on the western beaches of Tongatapu with several resorts and houses destroyed and/or badly damaged. Some coastal damage is also reported on the neighboring island of 'Eua. It is too early to fully assess the impact on remote coastal areas of Tongatapu (Tonga's main island) or further afield, including the outer islands, but concern remains about damage in Northern Tongatapu and contamination of drinking water sources and crops, and the resulting need for safe water supplies. No significant damage was reported in regard to Fua'amotu Airport. Its management has confirmed that the clearing of ash from the runway will be completed today (17 January). No assessments yet done on Nuku'alofa and 'Eua ports. Communication is still the most challenging single issue as internet and international phone lines are still out of order. Satellite phones are the only reliable instrument for communication with the outside but they, too, do not always work reliably. However, the that local phone systems have been restored. Power has also been restored to parts of the capital. There are no confirmed fatalities to date. However, two persons are still missing. Only some minor injuries are reported on Tongatapu and Atata, but, it should be borne in mind that assessments - particularly of the outer islands – are yet to be released.

Humanitarian Needs and Response

Due to the current challenges in communication, the situation and arising humanitarian needs could not be established fully as of now. The Tongan Government is working to assess needs and advised it would have more information by the end of today. It also announced it would have a donor briefing later today (more on this on the next update).

The Pacific Humanitarian Team (PHT) members are working on establishing contacts with partners on the ground and national cluster counterparts. OCHA is working on establishing lines of communication with Tonga's National Emergency Management Office (NEMO) which is leading the assessments and the government response – in close cooperation with the Tonga Red Cross Society.

Today, the Pacific Humanitarian Team (PHT) convened in Suva to discuss challenges and next steps. The PHT is comprised of United Nations Agencies, the Red Cross movement and Oxfam as representative of international Non-Government Organizations in humanitarian action in the Pacific.

The PHT and cluster partners are working to:

- Support re-establishment of adequate communication – and in particular telephone and internet services – in Tonga; there is a Government of Tonga request regarding this to the Emergency Telecommunications Cluster led by the World Food Programme (WFP);
- Provide in-country support through United Nations agencies working in Tonga, including UNFPA, UNICEF, the Food and Agriculture Organization, the International Organization for Migration, and the World Health Organization.
- Provide remote support to humanitarian partners on the ground and to government counterparts. Through the logistics cluster, led by WFP the United Nations is looking at ways to bring in relief supplies (and subsequently surge staff) – in close coordination with relevant authorities in Tonga, humanitarian partners and donor countries.

- Provide support from international non-government organizations such as the International Planned Parenthood Federation through its local member association for reproductive health in emergencies.

Pacific Humanitarian Team Cluster update

Emergency Telecommunications

- Satellite phones and BGAN unit (if suitable) are ready to be shipped; a way of shipment is to be established;
- Looking to support improvement/repair of internet services; and
- A government request has been received by WFP.

Logistics

- Pacific Logistics Mapping (PALM) updated, with current stocks of emergency supplies available to ship to Tonga;
- List of available relief items in-country will be sent out; and
- Cluster is establishing a logistical framework for shipping relief items (by air and by sea) as well as a potential Humanitarian Air Service in close consultation with concerned government authorities.

Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

- The majority of the population in Tonga depends on rainwater or on water from boreholes; therefore, contamination of water sources is a critical issue;
- As of now, no precise information on situation available; more information to be gathered in the coming days; and
- 1,000 WASH and Dignity kits are ready for shipment; as well as water quality testing units.

Food Security

- Between 80 and 90 per cent of the population in Tonga are active in agriculture or fishery, and this is a critical source of income to the Tongan community; and
- More information being sought on the current situation from the Ministry of Agriculture.

Health and Nutrition

- Health facilities are functioning;
- No increase in consultations reported as of now;
- Air quality of concern but current development (stop of ash fall) shows positive sign of improvement;
- Central medical warehouse (near the coastline in Nuku'alofa) not damaged by *tsunami* and operational; and
- The Tonga Emergency Medical Assistance Team (TEMAT) has been deployed to outer islands; international Emergency Medical Teams from New Zealand and the United States are standing by and can be deployed upon request of the Tongan Government.

Education

- Currently seeking details on situation and potential needs; and
- Education supplies ready to be shipped if needed.

Protection

- Currently seeking details on situation and potential needs;
- Needs likely for psychosocial support for affected persons - Training and capacity building in psychological First Aid and in psycho-social support was carried out during the last months; and
- Dignity and Hygiene kits are available in Tonga to be distributed.

Shelter

- No details on situation and potential needs available yet.

Partner Action

New Zealand carried out a surveillance flight today to ascertain the extend of damage. Further information to be provided in the next update. New Zealand also has a navy vessel on standby to sail to Tonga if required and subject to waterfront/port conditions. It has approved a NZ\$0.5 million emergency grant for responding to immediate needs in Tonga, until more detailed assessments of the damage are undertaken and relief priorities are determined by Tongan authorities. **Australia** has also carried out a reconnaissance flight to assess damage to infrastructure and is readying *HMAS Adelaide* to travel to Tonga with relief supplies to be loaded in Brisbane. In addition, the Australian Government announced AUD1m in immediate aid. The **United States** has also pledged support through air and navy assets should there be a request from Tonga. The **European Union** has activated its Emergency Management Service of the EU Earth Observations System *Copernicus*. The **Secretariat of the Pacific Community** is providing advice to affected countries on the impact of the volcano and its ashfall.

