

Tonga tsunami: 'One of the worst Pacific volcano eruptions in years'

The Red Cross has been responding to the Tonga tsunami, which has badly affected all 36 of its Pacific islands after the volcanic eruption on Saturday, 15 January 2022.

After repeated flare-ups, the Hunga Tonga Hunga Ha'apai volcano finally erupted in the early hours of Saturday, 15 January.

The underwater blast lasted eight minutes, sending ash 60,000 feet into the sky in a 5km plume.

The impact was felt as far away as Peru, with 'violent' waves reaching 6,200 miles across the Pacific, spilling thousands of oil barrels into Peruvian waters.

Just 64km south of the volcano, the small Pacific Island country of Tonga was slammed by a tsunami wave of 1.2 metres.

The impact immediately severed communication lines, cutting off the islands from the rest of the world.

As a result, the true extent of the damage remains unknown. But overhead images show the islands blanketed in layers of volcanic ash. In coastal areas, trees were ripped down by the waves and buildings torn apart.

Early reports from the Tongan government say that 84% of the population has been directly affected and 99% of people have been impacted in some way.

Two islands have been evacuated due to the total destruction of all homes.

It has been reported that five people have lost their lives.

An unfolding situation: 'Devastation in Tonga could be immense'

So far, dust and ash has hampered relief efforts.

But the Red Cross and International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) have been working round the clock to reach people, since the volcanic eruption.

Staff and volunteers have been travelling across the 36 islands, alongside authorities, to provide humanitarian aid to those worst affected. Katie Greenwood, IFRC's Pacific Head of Delegation, says:

From what little updates we have, the scale of the devastation could be immense – especially for outer lying islands. But local Red Cross teams are well placed to respond quickly to emergencies like this.

“Trained Tonga Red Cross teams will be on the ground supporting evacuations in coordination with public authorities, providing first aid if needed, and distributing prepositioned relief supplies.”

Although the picture is still unclear, there are fears that communities may not have access to safe and clean drinking water due to pollution from the ashfall and salt water from the Tsunami.

Shelter is also a concern, particularly for those communities near the coastline.

“The Red Cross currently has enough relief supplies in the country to support 1,200 households with essential items such as tarpaulins, blankets, kitchen sets, shelter tool kits and hygiene kits,” Katie continues.

“Red Cross societies and the IFRC will be on-hand to replenish supplies where needed.

“We are determined to provide the extra resources and support they may need in the face of such a devastating disaster,” Katie said.

Finding family and friends in Tonga

With communication lines down, people around the world have been unable to check on the welfare of family and friends in Tonga.

“One of the other priorities for the Tonga Red Cross will be to work with our Movement partner, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to restore family links,” Katie says.

“This will help people from all over the world try and find out if their family and friends in Tonga are safe and well.”

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