

Volcano causes widespread devastation in Congo

John Farmer
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The eruption of Mount Nyiragongo has driven at least half a million people from their homes. Residents of Goma city and surrounding villages in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) have been severely hit by the January 17 eruption of Africa's most active volcano.

Approximately 45 people are believed to have been killed in the immediate aftermath, as molten lava swept everything before it. The number of deaths is thought to have increased significantly in the last days, however, as the severely polluted atmosphere and lack of clean water takes its toll. Babies and young children are especially at risk, and there have been reports of elderly people suffering heart attacks as a result of the noxious hydrogen sulphide gas given off by the eruption. Disease is also spreading, with several people reported to have died from cholera.

On Monday January 21, more than 50 people were killed when a petrol station blew up, the fuel exploding when it came into contact with hot lava.

Experts have been warning for some time of the danger of an eruption from the volcano. A report dated March 2001, warned, "...the level of lava in the crater of Nyiragongo had risen dangerously and could break out at any time. There were now fears that the lava could reach the town of Goma where nearly 500,000 people live."

A British *Channel 4 Television* news item on January 21 supported this assessment. In an interview, one volcanologist who has studied Mount Nyiragongo over many years said that prior to the latest explosion, the lava level in the chamber was 10 times higher than the last time the volcano exploded in 1977. In that eruption, lava burst through fissures in the chamber at speeds of up to 100 kilometres per hour, producing a river of molten rock 1,000 metres wide that killed nearly 2,000

people in less than 30 minutes.

The latest eruption, which occurred just before dawn, sent lava flows over two metres high and 50 metres wide cascading through Goma, 10 kilometres to the south of Mount Nyiragongo. Buildings—including food stores belonging to several humanitarian agencies—roads, the city airport and water treatment plants have been destroyed. A radio controller for the United Nations, Desire Bukasa, told *Reuters*, "The smell of sulphur is everywhere and there are tremors every ten minutes. There are fissures opening up in the town with smoke billowing out". According to *CNN*, 14 villages in the path of the lava have burned to the ground.

Goma is presently controlled by the Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD), a rebel organization backed by neighbouring Rwanda. The area bordering Rwanda is a strategic crossroads in the war between the DRC government, surrounding countries and various rebel factions that has seen an estimated 2.5 million people killed since it began in 1998.

Following the eruption, most of Goma's population moved across the border to the Rwandan town of Gisenyi, which is also affected by volcanic fissures opening up and may also have to be evacuated.

The relief charity Christian Aid was concerned that the situation at the border with Rwanda was "out of control". In a press statement they report, "The situation in Gisenyi is chaotic. There is no control of people's movements. There is no food, no water, no accommodation."

The RCD have been particularly criticised for their limited response to the disaster. News reports cite scenes of RCD officials looting United Nations offices in Goma. The RCD are regarded as a Rwandan occupying force by much of the local population. Many

Goma residents have bitter memories of the refugee settlements established around the city in 1994, following the genocide in Rwanda when up to a million ethnic Tutsis were massacred by the Hutu regime. Thousands of ethnic Hutus fled from Rwanda into Goma and the DRC before the Rwandan Patriotic Front, the mainly Tutsi forces that are now in power in Rwanda. Thousands died in appalling conditions in refugee camps that were nominally under the control of the UN and the aid agencies but which were really run by the Hutu militia.

The latest reports indicate that many of the refugees fleeing the volcano are now returning from Gisenyi to Goma, driven back by the lack of food, water and other vital necessities. There have been reports of returning Goma residents clashing with Rwandan rebel forces outside Gisenyi, who were attempting to direct the refugees back towards a UN reception centre. One of the refugees is quoted, saying, “We will not go to camps, we will not be prisoners in Rwanda.”

The situation in Goma remains extremely unstable. With water purification plants destroyed and Lake Kivu contaminated by noxious chemicals in the lava, there are fears that refugees could be poisoned or infected by bacteria, as the lake serves both as the sewer for Goma and its main source of drinking water. An outbreak of cholera is a particular hazard—a major epidemic followed the last eruption of Nyiragongo in 1977. Another fear is that lava flowing into Lake Kivu could cause a build up of methane gas on the lakebed, with the risk of explosions. However, carbon dioxide is the major concern, as even at low levels it could suffocate people living around the lake.

Several aid agencies were critical of the United Nation’s response to the disaster. Monica Castellarnau of Medecins sans Frontieres said, “Cholera is our biggest concern and it’s fatal. There is no water or power and no stocks of medicine and there is cholera in the lake which they are drinking from.” Another aid worker said, “The UN’s a day behind the disaster, it would be better if people kept away [from Goma] but without alternatives what can you expect?”

The response to the crisis from the major Western powers has been minimal to non-existent. Most notably, the United States has committed itself to a mere \$224,000. Britain has pledged \$2.9 million, Belgium (the former colonial power) \$1.1 million, and

Germany \$270,000.



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