Eruption of Hawaii's Kilauea volcano continues into second week

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At least 1,700 residents of the Puna District on the island of Hawaii, the largest island in the Hawaiian archipelago, have been forced to evacuate their homes as the island has been rocked by a series of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions over the past week, with geologists warning Wednesday that this could be the beginning of an even more destructive volcanic event.

The island of Hawaii, commonly known as the "Big Island," rests upon the world's longest-erupting volcano, Kilauea. On May 3, after two days of minor earthquakes that prompted an evacuation order from Hawaii County authorities, two fissures emerged in the residential neighborhood of Leilani Estates, opening up lava flows that destroyed two homes almost immediately and released deadly gases such as sulfur dioxide into the air.

The next day, a 6.9-magnitude earthquake struck the area, the strongest in a series of several earthquakes of 5.0 magnitude or greater since May 3.

As of this writing, 15 fissures have formed in the Puna District, making the area treacherous even as some residents have been allowed to return to survey the wreckage and retrieve what belongings they could from their homes. Lava fountains up to 300 feet high have been seen and 117 acres of land had been covered by lava by May 9.

On Wednesday, scientists from the US Geological survey warned that the lava level in the volcano was dropping steadily, potentially setting the stage for a steam-driven explosion at Kilauea's summit. If lava reaches the groundwater level, the steam generated could shoot exploding boulders almost a mile away and smaller rocks up to several miles from the summit, as well as sending hazardous ash spewing into the atmosphere.

Hawaii County officials also told reporters Wednesday that they had asked the operators of a geothermal energy plant, Puna Geothermal Ventures, to remove 12,000 gallons of highly volatile pentane fuel from the area. Residents have long expressed concern over the safety of Puna Geothermal Venture, an energy plant built 25 years ago in what was widely known to be a high-risk zone for lava flow in the event of a major eruption. Pentane is prone to explosions and can cause major health issues such as vomiting and respiratory distress if spilled.

At least 36 buildings, including 27 homes, have been destroyed in the Leilani Estates subdivision so far.

As is the case with natural disasters around the world, the Kilauea eruption has laid bare historic levels of social inequality and the irrationality of the capitalist system.

Leilani Estates is a neighborhood situated directly on the lava field, where many working-class families have been forced to live due to rising housing costs. Leilani Estates has a median income of just over $31,000 and an official poverty rate of 21.9 percent, more than double that of the state as a whole.

However, this statistic does not account for Hawaii's extraordinarily high cost of living, which is the highest in the nation and can be as much as two-thirds higher than the average on the US mainland. According to the US Census Bureau, when the cost of living is factored in, the state's poverty rate increases from 10.9 percent, among the lowest in the nation, to 16.8 percent, the ninth-highest. That is in spite of an "official" unemployment rate of just two percent. The true level of poverty in Leilani Estates is therefore likely to be considerably higher than the official rate.

A major driver of extremely high living costs for Hawaiian workers is the state's desirability as a vacation destination for the global elite, whose

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insatiable desire for real estate has caused housing prices to soar over recent decades.

This has been accompanied by a sharp increase in homelessness, which set a new state record in 2017. The official homeless population last year stood at 7,000 in a state of just 1.43 million people, giving it the highest rate of homelessness per capita in the United States. However, it is widely recognized that the official homeless rate vastly understates the depth of the crisis.

The fact that workers and their families are forced by low wages and ever rising living costs to live on an active lava field in the world's wealthiest country is an indictment of the capitalist system, which subordinates all aspects of life to the profit interests of the ruling class.

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