

Tonga faces “unprecedented disaster” following volcanic eruption

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Tonga is facing an “unprecedented disaster,” according to the government, from the massive volcanic eruption last Saturday. It covered the Pacific nation in ash, triggered a 15-metre tsunami that destroyed almost all homes on two small islands and damaged undersea communications cables, largely cutting off the country.

The eruption of the Hunga-Tonga-Hunga-Ha’apai volcano—65 kilometres from Tonga’s main islands—is being described by some experts as the most explosive volcanic eruption in 30 years. The volcanic mushroom plume from the eruption reached the stratosphere and extended radially over all Tonga’s islands.

The full scale of devastation caused by the tsunami is becoming clearer. The first official government statement on Tuesday said three people had died so far, including a British national, a 65-year-old woman from Mango Island, and a 49-year-old man from Nomuka Island.

Every home on Mango Island, where about 50 people live, has been destroyed. Multiple injuries were reported across the country, but the extent of casualties remains unclear.

The Tongan navy has deployed health teams and taken water, food and tents to the Ha’apai islands, closest to the volcano. One aerial image taken by a New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) aircraft showed catastrophic damage to Mango: no houses, just a few temporary tarpaulin shelters could be seen.

Tonga’s deputy head of mission in Australia, Curtis Tu’ihalangie, described the NZDF images as “alarming,” adding that they showed numerous buildings missing on Atata Island as well. Nomuka Island in the Ha’apai group was also extensively damaged.

Parts of the western side of the main island of

Tongatapu were evacuated after dozens of houses were destroyed. According to *Stuff*, on the island of ‘Eua two homes were “flattened” and 45 severely damaged, and eight houses in Kolomotu’a, in the centre of Tongatapu, were left uninhabitable.

Water supplies have been seriously affected by volcanic ash. Most people rely on rainwater, often gathered from rooftops. They have been frantically cleaning ash from their houses. Scientists have warned that the eruption could cause acid rain for some time to come, which could damage food crops and kill off fish supplies. People are being warned to remain indoors in the event of rain.

Undersea internet and telecommunications cables were severed by the tsunami, largely cutting Tonga off from the rest of the world. Tongans living in New Zealand, Australia and elsewhere have been unable to contact their families on the islands. On Thursday, major communications provider Digicel said it had restored some services via satellite, but it will take a month of repairs before the network is fully operational.

Tonga’s international airport was reportedly cleared of ash by Thursday morning, meaning supplies can finally be delivered by air.

International efforts to deliver aid, however, threaten to introduce COVID-19 into the country, which has so far remained almost free from the virus. Tonga’s only recorded case of COVID-19 entered from New Zealand after Wellington began lifting travel restrictions.

A UNICEF spokesman in Fiji said that relief efforts had to be conducted without “doing anything to threaten the safety of the population.” Jonathan Pryke from the Sydney-based Lowy Institute told the *New York Times*: “Whatever goodwill might be built up by the response would be completely undone if they bring

Covid into Tonga.”

Aid agencies say shops have begun running out of food. Tonga Red Cross has enough supplies stockpiled to support 1,200 households, but Sophie Ford, international response coordinator for the Australian Red Cross, told the *Guardian* these will need to be replenished in the coming days and weeks.

It appears that a great deal of necessary emergency support will come, not from the regional powers but from voluntary agencies, particularly the Tongan diaspora in New Zealand, Australia and the US. In New Zealand, a newly-established relief committee is calling for donations of containers and goods to send to families in Tonga.

Australia and New Zealand sent surveillance flights on Monday to assess the damage. New Zealand has dispatched two naval ships with food and water supplies, and air force transport planes will start flights today.

Australia and New Zealand both regard the southwest Pacific as their neo-colonial patch. Their financial and aid contributions are inevitably tied to protecting their own interests. The strings attached are increasingly resented by local Pacific leaders.

As global tensions escalate amid Washington’s build-up to war against China, the US and its allies, Australia and New Zealand, are seeking to strengthen ties with Pacific countries and boost their military presence in the region, to push back against Beijing’s influence.

There is no doubt concern over the potential for political instability in Tonga. The volcanic eruption follows the installation of a new government last December. Siaosi Sovaleni defeated former Finance Minister ‘Aisake Eke and took office as prime minister with the support of the monarch, King Tupou VI, and the hereditary nobles.

Under Tonga’s undemocratic parliamentary system, there are 17 so-called “People’s Representative” seats, and eight members elected by 33 hereditary nobles. The prime minister is elected by the parliament. Sovaleni took office following behind-the-scenes intrigues in which, according to Radio NZ correspondent Kalafi Moala, the nobles played a critical role.

The election was a major defeat for the incumbent PATOA Party, with five sitting MPs losing their seats, including Siaosi Pohiva and Mateni Tapueluelu, the son and son-in-law of the late “pro-democracy” Prime

Minister ‘Akilisi Pohiva.

The turn-around followed repeated interventions last year by the king, who made trenchant criticisms of the previous government in the midst of a deepening social crisis including a widespread methamphetamine epidemic.

Addressing the opening of parliament on January 12, Tupou VI declared the kingdom must “support the private sector” and face the ongoing challenges of a “fledging economy,” as well as the threat of Covid and illegal drugs. “In order to advance we must have an accounting of where the nation is financially now. Our local market cannot sustain our balance of payments,” he said. The speech portends a fresh round of attacks on the working class, many of whom are dependent on the public sector for jobs and services.

In the event of growing popular discontent and a major crisis, military intervention by Australia and New Zealand cannot be ruled out. In 2006, the two countries dispatched more than 150 soldiers and police after riots erupted in Nuku’alofa, leaving six people dead and destroying 80 percent of the central business district. The unrest came amid deepening hostility towards the country’s absolute monarchy from both ordinary Tongans and dissatisfied sections of the business and political elite.



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