

Eighty-five percent of Tonga's population impacted by volcanic eruption

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Almost 85 percent of Tonga's 105,000 people have been affected by the recent volcanic eruption and tsunami, the government said earlier this week.

The Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai volcano is located about 65 kilometres from Tonga's capital Nuku'alofa. The eruption on January 15—one of the biggest in the last 30 years—triggered a 1.2 metre high tsunami that crashed ashore on the main island of Tongatapu and devastated islands in the Ha'apai group, near the volcano.

Nomuka and Mango islands both sustained extensive damage. Sixty-two residents of the remote Mango Island had to relocate to nearby Nomuka after losing their homes and belongings, but were forced to relocate again to Tongatapu due to food and water shortages.

Communities, roads and airports were blanketed in thick ash, and flood waters damaged infrastructure, homes and schools. Power and communication channels were almost completely cut off. Many of the country's boats were destroyed by the tsunami. The death toll remains at three.

A New Zealander living in Tonga told *Stuff* on January 25 that people are “struggling” to breathe and shops have closed due to ash fall. Jordan McCarthy, from the village of Pangu, said gardens, roads and houses were now blanketed by a “fine ash.” Food businesses and markets had been badly affected and most produce was wiped out when a mixture of ash and water hardened into a “hail-like stone,” McCarthy said.

Experts have confirmed that the ash fall would affect residents' health, contaminate fresh water supplies and damage crops. Auckland University Professor of Volcanology Shane Cronin said the ash could take weeks to wash away, depending on the rain. “Without running water, it was impossible to wash the ash off. Instead, Tongans will need to sweep the ash away,” he

said.

Several flights from the New Zealand and Australian Air Forces have landed at the main Fua'amotu Airport, bringing relief supplies. The flights were only able to land because more than 120 locals flocked to the airport to sweep ash from the runway. The volunteers spent 16 hours a day for four days sweeping the landing strip. Another 50 have been involved in a similar effort at Ha'apai Airport.

Many areas are still scrambling to restore basic necessities. The National Emergency Operations Centre said clean water was still their main concern. The Aotearoa (New Zealand) Tonga Relief Committee itemised breakfast food, mainly for children, gardening tools and outboard motors as desperately needed. Auckland's Tongan community has so far collected \$NZ1.6 million worth of food and groceries with shipping containers set to reach Nuku'alofa on Monday.

Telephone communications between the islands are still a major challenge according to the Tongan government. Both international and domestic communication was lost when the undersea cable connecting Tonga with Fiji was damaged. The extent of the damage won't be known until a repair ship arrives. According to the company US Subcom, repairing the cable is “no simple process,” and is expected to take weeks. Tonga Cable Ltd chairperson Samuiela Fonua told Radio NZ the cable lies in the area that was directly affected by the eruption and the conditions at the site are a major concern.

The problems establishing essential communications produced one notable degrading episode. Several desperate appeals, including by Parliament Speaker Lord Fakafanua and New Zealand opposition MP Shane Reti, were made to US tech billionaire Elon

Musk to provide internet terminals to help reconnect Tongans to the internet using his company SpaceX's 49 Starlink satellites.

Musk tweeted in response: "This is a hard thing for us to do right now, as we don't have enough satellites with laser links and there are already geo sats that serve the Tonga region." Replying to a subsequent Reuters' story, Musk asked Tongans to confirm "if it is important for SpaceX to send over Starlink terminals." In a heated exchange, people pointed out that Tongans couldn't reply to Musk because they had no internet connections! In the end, nothing has been forthcoming.

The amount of aid offered by the local imperialist powers, New Zealand and Australia, remains woefully inadequate. New Zealand's contribution totals \$NZ3 million, which covers relief supplies, water generation capability and clean-up equipment, as well as grants to humanitarian organisations. Australia's total is a similar \$A3 million. Canberra usually uses its allocated aid budget in such emergencies, but this represents just 0.19 percent of gross national income, far less than the 0.7 percent recommended by the UN.

International assistance is under way, with New Zealand and Australian air force and navy ships having arrived and others coming from Japan, the US, the UK, and Fiji. The operation is fraught with dangers over the possible introduction of COVID-19 into the fragile country. Tonga has reported just one case of COVID and is one of the few countries currently designated virus free. Only about 61 percent of Tongans are fully vaccinated. The importation of the virus could well trigger a bigger human disaster than the volcanic eruption.

The dangers were underscored this week when nearly two dozen sailors aboard the Australian naval ship HMAS Adelaide, en route to Tonga, were confirmed as infected. The vessel was eventually forced to deliver supplies without contact with the population. An Australian C-17 Globemaster military transport plane was earlier turned around mid-flight after a crew member aboard was also diagnosed with COVID.

The international aid operation has little to do with meeting the urgent and overwhelming needs of the Tongan population. The imperialist powers are seeking to exploit environmental and humanitarian catastrophes, which are frequent in the vulnerable region, for geo-political and militarist ends.

The crisis is already being used to whip-up anti-China sentiment. Writing in *Nikkei Asia*, New Zealand journalist Michael Field noted that former Australian Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd had promptly tweeted that Australia must be first to give Tonga assistance. "Failing that," Rudd said, "China will be there in spades." Large Australian warships should be sent immediately, he declared: "It's why we built them."

Jonathan Pryke of the Sydney-based Lowy Institute said that the aid Australia and New Zealand provide is "not entirely altruistic." Such support generates "a lot of goodwill and 'soft power' in the region," he said, and gives the "defense assets" of both countries "the chance to 'get into the field.'"

The New Zealand website *Stuff* also ran an op-ed repeating charges levelled by Washington that Beijing is conducting "debt trap diplomacy" in the Pacific. In 2006, China offered Tonga a \$US100m loan to rebuild Nuku'alofa after rioting. Tonga currently owes almost two-thirds of its debt to China's Export-Import Bank. In 2020 Tonga asked China for its debt to be forgiven.

The reality is, as Washington's escalating build-up to war intensifies, the US and its local allies, Australia and New Zealand, are seeking to strengthen ties with Pacific countries and boost their military presence in the region, in order to push back against China's influence. While doing the bare minimum to address the humanitarian disaster, the imperialist powers are utilising the Tongan crisis to further this reactionary and dangerous campaign.



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