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Papua New Guinea - Volcanic Eruption OCHA Situation Report No. 4

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OCHA Situation Report No. 4 Papua New Guinea (PNG) - Volcanic eruption commenced: 5 August 2002

This situation report is based on information provided by OCHA's Regional Disaster Response Adviser for the Pacific, based in Suva, Fiji. Sources include the United Nations Country Team, PNG National Disaster Management Office (NDMO), University of PNG, Kimbe Vulcanological Observatory, Emergency Management Australia, and AusAID, notably their field officer in West New Britain.

The Ongoing Eruption

1. Although steam and fumes are still being emitted from Mt. Pago's upper and lower vents, since early November the volcano has settled down and no ash emissions have been observed recently. Lava continues to flow slowly from the northwestern-most vent of the fissure system, creating a significant lava field within Witori Caldera. Some volcanic earthquakes are still being recorded, but overall seismicity is at a low 'normal background' level for Witori Caldera. There has been no noticeable ground deformation in the last month, in contrast to the period between the start of the eruption and early November, when complex and significant movements were recorded.

2. The Mt. Pago Volcano Monitoring Team at the new Kimbe Vulcanological Observatory (KVO) expects the vapour emission, lava flow, and slow deformation to continue, and they state that there is no threat from the current level and nature of eruption. Its previously dynamic nature and experience from other similar volcanoes indicate that the character of the eruption may change, although there are no indications from current data trends for a major increase in activity. Small fluctuations in the eruptive behaviour may take place with little warning, but a change to more hazardous eruptions is expected to be heralded by various observable phenomena.

The Emergency Situation

3. Acting on scientific advice following the lull in volcanic and seismic activity, in November the West New Britain Provincial Administration began to encourage most of the 13,000 displaced people to return to their

villages on the Hoskins Peninsula, if these were areas assessed as being of lower risk. The return was predicated on the ability of the authorities to evacuate the returnees within 6 hours, using trucks from New Britain Palm Oil Limited, if this should become necessary. Most people accommodated in the 'care centres' accepted this decision and were keen to return home.

4. The ongoing eruptions in New Britain, which include Tavurvur Volcano at Rabaul in the east and Mt. Ulawun as well as Mt. Pago in the west, also pose a hazard to aviation, necessitating the diversion and cancellation of many flights.

National Response

5. Aerial observation of the volcano has been suspended for the present, owing to financial constraints. However, remote-sensing instruments are still in place, enabling continuous monitoring of the threat by staff of the KVO. Technicians from Rabaul Vulcanological Observatory (RVO) and AusAID are currently installing equipment that will telemeter data from a seismometer and an electronic tilt back to Rabaul in 'real-time', to enable vulcanologists to monitor from the main observatory in Rabaul. They have also produced a volcanic hazard map based on three scenarios; for a large, intermediate, or small-scale eruption in the future. The map is designed to assist the Provincial Disaster Committee (PDC) in managing the current emergency and in establishing longer-term contingency measures.

6. Whilst the volcano monitoring team, the civil authorities and their risk management advisers are all highly active in day-to-day management of the current situation and in contingency planning, they must ensure that they remain closely coordinated and informed about all issues of mutual concern, on a continuous basis. For instance, decision-makers need daily reports on the level of threat posed by the volcano, as well as longer-term projections. Poor passage of information is partly a product of the disaster management system in the province below the PDC, which lacks clear organizational structure and where there is insufficient delegation of authority to managers in the field.

7. Overall however, the West New Britain Provincial Administration has done a very creditable job in this emergency; evacuating, resettling, provisioning up to 12,000 people, with funds and little external support, especially initially. It is now interested in having the Red Cross visit each 'care centre' to ascertain how well they worked in terms of health, nutrition, sanitation, and other issues. If this evaluation goes ahead, the recommendations will inform future emergency preparedness efforts and help to construct a more effective provincial disaster management system, based on the lessons learnt.

8. At national level, the Government has provided the second half of a PGK 2 million (USD 572,000) grant to the Province. The appointment of a new director at the NDMO has reinvigorated the Mt. Pago Task Force and should result in more responsive support to the West New Britain PDC, and better passage of information to non-governmental and international actors. It is also hoped that the some of the managerial wrinkles that were

apparent during recent disasters in PNG will now be ironed out.

International Response

9. Please refer to the table of international assistance included in OCHA Situation Report No. 3 on this emergency, dated 27 September 2002.

10. UNICEF has completed its planned distribution of food and non-food relief items, direct to the 'care centres'. UNDP has also successfully conducted its project to provide a transport service for evacuees between the 'care centres' and their villages so that they can access their land for garden produce and bush shelter materials, implemented through the Catholic Diocese of West New Britain.

Current and Future Needs

11. Although some food assistance has been made, the main need over the next three to four months will be for food. The few who are still displaced will continue to need rations, and the majority who have returned to their homes will probably need support until their new gardens have become productive. During their 4 month absence in the 'care centres' the evacuees harvested from their existing gardens without replanting, partly because they believed that new crops could be poisoned but also because it was difficult for them to get to their land. The Provincial Administration has been advised to verify returnees' medium-term food needs by surveying their garden areas.

12. It remains possible that the population on the Hoskins Peninsula around Mt. Pago may need to be evacuated again, in the near or more distant future. In fact, a major eruption may also impact upon additional communities on Commodore Bay, to the east and northeast of the peninsula, as in the 1911-17 eruption. There is thus a need for ongoing contingency planning by the provincial and national governments, including the identification and preparation of better 'care centre' locations. Appropriate agencies including international donors should consider assisting the authorities in this effort.

13. OCHA remains in close contact with the office of the UN Resident Coordinator and the Director of the NDMO in Port Moresby, through its Regional Disaster Response Adviser.

This situation report, together with further information on this and other ongoing emergencies, is also available on the OCHA Internet Website at <http://www.reliefweb.int>

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Top

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Source: European Volcanological Society

Date: 2 Sept 2002

Papua New Guinea: Pago volcano update 02 Sep 2002

As of the 31st of August, the Rabaul Volcano Observatory (RVO) has reported that the following summary report is based on information from the United Nations Resident Coordinator in PNG. Situation. After its eruption on 5 August 2002, Mt Pago Volcano in Papua New Guinea's West New Britain Province remains very active, spewing fine ash with silicone of a high health risk factor and fluorine/sulphur dioxide fumes which will cause acid rain.

The combination of these factors will eventually destroy all crops, kill livestock, and continue to have adverse effects on human health. Therefore, human and environmental consequences of the eruption are becoming increasingly serious. Ash falls are affecting the north-northwest part of Mt Pago reaching areas of more than 10 km from the Hoskins Peninsula. Changing wind patterns have shifted previously declared low risk areas to high risk zones. Lava is continuing to flow from the vent system that extends northwest from Mt. Pago. Ground deformation is likely to continue in the western part of Witori Caldera.

The Provincial Government has evacuated more than 12,000 people from villages surrounding the Mt Pago Volcano. About 8,000 people are being sheltered in seven evacuation centres around the Kimbe area. More than a third of the affected people remain at risk in their villages. Kimbe, a town of about 20,000 populations and the evacuated people, is located 35 km from Mt. Pago. Although it has not yet been affected, the entire town may need to be evacuated in the event of a large scale of eruption, which remains possible.

The Pago volcano is currently at the ORANGE alert level. (From UN-OCHA).

[Top](#)

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Source: European Volcanological Society

Date: 4 Sept 2002

Papua New Guinea: Pago volcano update 04 Sep 2002

The Rabaul Volcano Observatory (RVO) has reported that toxic ash that has rained down on farmland around Papua New Guinea's Mount Pago volcano for a month is making the area uninhabitable and up to 4,000 people will have to find new homes, an official said on Tuesday.

The volcano on New Britain Island is spewing fine silicone ash, suffocating and poisoning trees in palm oil and coconut plantations and drying them out so they catch fire at the slightest spark. William Padio, chairman of the provincial disaster committee, said the area most affected extended for 10 km (6.2 miles) from the volcano through a 45 degree arc. "We are looking at relocation in the long term and immediately," Padio said. "We're talking about 3,000 to 4,000 people. They'll have to learn to live with it." Mt. Pago, about 50 km (30 miles) south of the town of Kimbe, began erupting on August 5.

Up to 15,000 people have been either evacuated or affected although no one has been injured. Australia, New Zealand and Japan have contributed emergency assistance and seismological monitoring equipment and researchers from the U.S. Geological Survey are expected in the area soon to help determine whether there is a risk of a serious eruption. Mt. Pago, a relatively unstudied volcano, last spewed smoke and ash in 1933 and erupted in the 1920s. Volcano experts say there are trench-like deformations in the crater that could indicate that magma is pooling beneath the surface and may one day force its way out in an explosion.

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[Top](#)

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Papua New Guinea: Pago volcano update 17 Sep 2002

According to the Papua New Guinea information, monitoring equipment from the USGS and Japan will be arriving soon to monitor such volcanoes as Pago. "The team of experts from the US Geological Survey, including Andy Lockhart, Jeff Marso and Elliot Endo will work with their PNG counterparts Ima Itikarai, John Bosco and Jonathan Kuduon to install seismic stations, not only on Mount Pago, but on other volcanoes as well."

Mt Pago danger not over

General information :

Mount Pago in West New Britain could continue erupting for 22 years if it follows what it did from 1911 to 1933.

It is one of four very active volcanoes in the province, which has 27 altogether.

Despite the danger that the people of this resource-rich province face, Radio West New Britain, their source of vital information, is off air due to outstanding power bills.

Only Mount Ulawun reputed to be one of the six most dangerous volcanoes in the world, and located in Biella has a seismic station located there and is monitored from the Rabaul Volcanological Observatory in East New Britain.

That concern will be rectified in the next four weeks, with the arrival yesterday of a US-based rapid response team.

About K500,000 worth of seismic station equipment will arrive by ship on tomorrow and the team plans to set up a monitoring station in West New Britain, aside from the Malilima station.

The team of experts from the US Geological Survey, including Andy Lockhart, Jeff Marso and Elliot Endo will work with their PNG counterparts Ima Itikarai, John Bosco and Jonathan Kuduon to install seismic stations, not only on Mount Pago, but on other volcanoes as well.

Their equipment valued over K500,000 arrives tomorrow and will be installed together with the K250,000 worth of equipment from the Japanese Government. West New Britain Administrator William Padio revealed this yesterday while highlighting the ring of danger in this province.

"Out of those 27, four of those volcanoes are in Bialla including one under the sea at Lolobau, he said, naming other Bialla ones as Bamus, Hargy and Ulawun. He said that on worldwide assessment, based on vicinity to population, danger to investments and potential devastation, Ulawun (Bialla) is classed as one of the six most dangerous volcanoes in the world.

"Ulawun is a perfect cone with a hump which faces southeast (inland) which means that when Ulawun erupts it's not just going to blow its top off, it's going to crack downwards and the top half is going to slide into the sea. That is going to cause tsunamis huge waves that will wash up as much as 20 metres above sea level all along the coast.

He said that in the 1300s, Mt Richter at Siassi erupted and the wash-up happened all along the coast as far as Kandrian, Gasmata, Kove, Bali and Vitu. "Now if the Richter which is a bit smaller than Ulawun can cause tsunamis that far, just imagine what Ulawun can do, Mr Padio said.

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Top

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