



GOVERNMENT OF TONGA

MEDIA RELEASE

(18th January, 2022)

“FIRST OFFICIAL UPDATE FOLLOWING THE VOLCANIC ERUPTION”

An unprecedented disaster hit Tonga caused by the Hunga-Tonga-Hunga-Ha’apai volcanic eruption on Saturday evening 15th January, 2022 followed by a tsunami warning issued which triggered a mass evacuation. As a result of the eruption, a volcanic mushroom plume was released reaching the stratosphere and extending radially covering all Tonga Islands, generating tsunami waves rising up to 15 metres, hitting the west coasts of Tongatapu Islands, ‘Eua, and Ha’apai Islands.

Initial Damage Assessment is now underway with reports to the National Emergency Management Committee (NEMC) which met on Saturday night to discuss and approve immediate response operations and planning. NEMC has been meeting daily since.

Communications both international and domestic were severed due to damage sustained by the submarine cable from the eruptions and there was no further communication with the outer islands until the morning of Monday 17 January after the deployment of His Majesty Armed Forces patrol boats. As of today, limited communication has been made with Vava’u and Ha’apai through satellite phones and HF radio. There has been no communication with the Niuas as yet. The Niuas are considered low risk because of their relative distance to the Hunga-Tonga-Hunga-Ha’apai volcano.

Domestic phone calls operate only within Tongatapu and ‘Eua.

Due to the damage to the international fibre optics cable, internet is down. The two communications operators are working on satellite options to restore some services including the internet. Priority will be given to international calls and communication services such as emails. Efforts have been made to restore full communication capabilities.

The search and rescue operation began immediately on Sunday morning to ‘Atata island and ‘Ahau village. Of the two reported missing, one has been found alive and the other, a British national, was unfortunately the first fatality. To date, there are 3 confirmed fatalities including the British national; a 65 year-old female from Mango Island; and a 49-year old male from Nomuka island. There are also a number of injuries reported.

HMAF VOEA Ngahau Koula was deployed the day after the eruption with first responders including a health team and experts to the ‘Otumu’omu’a group in Ha’apai with some relief items including water, food and tents. Due to the severity of the damages observed, the HMAF’s VOEA Late was also deployed on Tuesday 18th January with another health team, additional resources and emergency responders based on reports from the initial mission for Mango, Fonoifua and Nomuka. The first consignment is headed

for these islands as all houses were destroyed on Mango island; only 2 houses remain on Fonoifua island with extensive damage on Nomuka island.

The evacuation process has also been begun for other affected areas from the small islands of 'Atata into Tongatapu and from Mango island and Fonoifua island into Nomuka island. Parts of the western side of Tongatapu including Kanokupolu (21 houses were completely damaged and 35 severely damaged) has also been evacuated to the evacuation centers and are supplied with necessary relief items by the Government. In the central district, Kolomotu'a reported 8 houses completely damaged and 20 severely damaged. The island of 'Eua has also reported 2 houses completely damaged and 45 severely damaged.

Water supplies have been seriously affected by the volcanic ash. Government efforts have been made to ensure the continuity of the supply of safe drinking water. An Initial Damage Assessment (IDA) team comprised of various representatives from government and non-government departments was deployed immediately on Sunday to coastal villages in Tongatapu to assess damages to private households and their needs. The cluster system has been activated and are compiling reports on needs to be addressed. Challenges to sea and air transportation remain due to damage sustained by the wharves and the ash that is covering the runways. Domestic and international flights have been deferred until further notice as the airports undergo clean-up.

Even though the tsunami warning has been cancelled and volcanic activity has significantly decreased, monitoring efforts continue.

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