

INFORMATION BULLETIN



International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
Fédération Internationale des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge et du Croissant-Rouge
Federación Internacional de Sociedades de la Cruz Roja y de la Media Luna Roja
الاتحاد الدولي لجمعيات الصليب الأحمر والهلال الأحمر

PAPUA NEW GUINEA: LANGILA VOLCANO

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In Brief

This bulletin (No. 01/2005) is being issued for information only. The Federation is not seeking funding or other assistance from donors for this operation at this time.

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The Situation

Langila volcano, located in Papua New Guinea's West New Britain province, 200km west of the provincial capital, Kimbe, has been erupting continuously since Thursday, 2 June 2005 and discharging heavier than normal loads of ash into the sky. Although the prevailing wind conditions pushed most of the initial ash fall out to sea, lower-level winds are now redirecting the ash back onto the island. This has led to reports of increasing cases of respiratory and eye irritation complaints and a growing concern that it will become necessary to evacuate the local population. Approximately 10,000 people are reported to live in the vicinity of the volcano, which is one of the most active in New Britain, with frequent eruptions recorded since the 19th century. Instruments installed in the vicinity by the Rabaul Volcanological Observatory have been damaged by lightning, so visual observation is the only means of monitoring the ongoing activity.



Photo 1: Langila, 1970 (source: global volcanism programme, Smithsonian Institution, <http://www.volcano.si.edu/world>).



On Monday (6 June 2005), the West New Britain provincial disaster office sent a team by helicopter to review the situation. The team found that 3486 people had been affected by the eruptions so far, mainly in the villages of Aitavala, Masele, Kilenge, Ongaea, Potne and Sumel, but also to a lesser extent in Vem, Galegale, Tauale and Laut. Villages that have so far experienced only light ash fall include Aimaga, Aipate and Gie.

Fallen ash has damaged food gardens, spoiling crops growing above ground and drawing moisture from the earth, exacerbating the onset of the dry season. Food supplies are reportedly becoming low as a result. Water sources have also been contaminated, although at this stage there are still some sources of potable water. There has so far been no damage to buildings or infrastructure reported.

The West New Britain provincial government has declared a level-two alert, noting that “there has been a general trend of a progressive increase in the intensity and magnitude” of volcanic activity. The provincial disaster office (PDO) has estimated that an increase in hazards arising from the volcano could see the number of people affected rise to as many as 6000.

The provincial authorities are encouraging voluntary evacuation of affected areas. Some evacuees have reportedly already begun making their way to safer areas such as the Anglican mission at Sag Sag, southwest of the volcano. Communication to the region is very limited, the provincial disaster office has informed the Red Cross that their only radio contact to the region has been unreliable since late last week and information available to date has often been passed on many times. This is further compounded by the remoteness of the region. Access is by sea (250 kilometres) or by helicopter.

Red Cross and Red Crescent Action

A representative of the Papua New Guinea Red Cross (PNGRC) travelled to the site of the volcano on Thursday (9 June) to conduct a needs assessment in collaboration with the PDO and to liaise with local PNGRC volunteers. All branches have been put on alert and asked to remain in communication with headquarters in case activation is required. Stocks of jerry cans and tarpaulins have been sent to Kimbe for distribution to people affected. Further relief items are prepositioned at the nearest branch in East New Britain.

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