

MEDIA RELEASE - Tonga blanketed in ash after volcanic eruption

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Tonga is coated in a thick blanket of ash after the eruption of undersea volcano Hunga-Tonga-Hunga-Ha'apai on January 15, which triggered tsunamis across the region, destroyed telecommunications and contaminated water supplies in the small Pacific Island nation.

Coastal communities in Fiji, Samoa and Vanuatu have been impacted by tsunami waves, along with communities as far afield as Australia, Japan and the Americas.

The Tongan government has said that "immediate assistance" is needed to deal with the fallout of the massive volcanic eruption.

Despite early videos of islanders rushing to higher ground as the first tsunami waves hit, telecommunications are now down as the undersea internet cables were damaged by the eruption.

"This volcanic eruption was up there with the likes of Krakatoa in terms of scale, so we are extremely concerned about the impacts of the eruption and tsunami in Tonga," said Damaris Pfendt, Caritas Australia's Pacific Humanitarian Coordinator.

"Volcanic ash and saltwater inundation from the tsunami waves have contaminated water supplies, so many communities will be left without clean water. Tonga already struggles with clean water supplies because it relies on groundwater and rainwater, so this will put communities in a really difficult position."

"From the few updates that have come through, we know that the devastation is significant, especially for the outer lying islands. There is an urgent need for fresh water and shelter, especially for the communities on the coastline whose homes were damaged by the tsunami waves. Roads and bridges have also been damaged."

"Thankfully Caritas Tonga already has emergency supplies pre-positioned in the capital and Ha'apai, so they will be able to respond quickly to immediate needs with these supplies. However, it's crucial that we step up and support our neighbours in Tonga, as they recover from this devastating volcanic eruption."

Caritas Australia is currently working to restore communications with our local partner, Caritas Tonga, to assess the situation on the ground and determine the most urgent needs.

Caritas Australia is currently raising funds to support communities impacted by the eruption and tsunami in Tonga.

Visit <https://www.caritas.org.au/donate/emergency-appeals/pacific/> or call 1800 024 413 toll free to provide much needed support by donating to our Pacific Emergency Appeal.

Media contact: Jessica Stone 0490 684 867 / jessica.stone@caritas.org.au
caritasmedia@caritas.org.au.

Note: Damaris Pfendt, Caritas Australia's Pacific Humanitarian Coordinator is available for interview.