

Filipino troops try to keep volcano evacuees safe

December 23 2009, By BULLIT MARQUEZ , Associated Press Writer



A column of ash shoots up to the sky in another mild eruption of the cloud-covered Mayon volcano as viewed from Legazpi city in Albay province, 500 kilometers (300 miles) southeast of Manila, Philippines at sunrise Wednesday, Dec. 23, 2009. The country's most active volcano began spewing ash last week and continuing lava flow in increasing signs of activity that prompted government authorities to force the evacuation of tens of thousands of residents living within the extended 8-kilometer (5-mile) danger zone. (AP Photo/Bullit Marquez)

(AP) -- Police and soldiers donned Santa hats and red clown noses and belted out songs in crammed evacuation centers in hopes of keeping 47,000 displaced residents from sneaking back to their homes on the slopes of a lava-spilling volcano.

Despite the risk of an imminent [explosive eruption](#) of the 8,070-foot (2,460-meter) Mayon, which has been oozing lava and blasting ash for a week, some residents weary of temporary shelters are conspiring to go back to their abandoned villages for traditional Christmas Eve family gatherings. Others want to retrieve their livestock or harvest crops.

"We are not used to spending Christmas in the evacuation center," said Ramon Ayala, 48, whose home lies within a five-mile (eight-kilometer) zone around Mayon that authorities emptied last week when the volcano started rumbling.

"We and many others plan to spend Christmas Eve in our homes," Ayala said.

Authorities are determined to make sure it does not happen.

"I have set a very high bar, which is zero casualty," said Gov. Joey Salceda of Albay province in the central Philippines. "If there's a lull and you step back into the danger zone, you'll immediately be escorted out."

Mayon [volcano](#) has erupted nearly 40 times over 400 years, sending people packing for months at a time. But never has it happened during the most important event in the [Philippine](#) calendar - Christmas time, which is associated with family, foods, friends and songs.

To keep the blues away, dozens of police officers Tuesday night dressed in Santa hats and clown costumes, crooned songs and led dancing to a popular pop tune in one school building. In another area, soldiers handed toys to children. More celebrations were due Wednesday.

The government tapped police, army, navy and air force personnel to organize bingo and other games, show movies on big projectors, hold concerts and Bible readings - "anything that will entertain the evacuees,"

said Jukes Nunez, a provincial disaster management official.

President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo was scheduled to visit Wednesday.

Although Mayon has been in a mild eruption phase since last week, chief state volcanologist Renato Solidum said it may be getting ready for something more powerful. But he said the explosion would not be as big as that of Mount Pinatubo in the northern Philippines in 1991, considered one of the biggest eruptions of the last century. About 800 people were killed.

Mayon shot up columns of ash at least 66 times in the last 24 hours, one reaching almost a mile (1 kilometer) into the cloudy sky, accompanied by 1,051 volcanic earthquakes - slightly less than the previous day, the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology said.

State volcanologist Ed Laguerta said lava ejected since last week amounted to nearly 706 million cubic feet (20 million cubic meters) - less than half of what Mayon spilled during the last eruption of 2006. Lava flows reached about three miles (5 kilometers) from the crater.

"The earthquakes and tremors, the gas output and those rumbling and booming sounds and series of mild ash explosions ... are the parameters which point to a higher percentage of a hazardous eruption happening," Laguerta said.

Solidum said that Mayon's alert level, currently at one step below a hazardous eruption, will be raised if taller ash columns appear together with the rolling of rocks and ash.

The 47,000 evacuees account for nearly all residents living along Mayon's steep slopes, but soldiers were still checking villages to make sure no holdouts were hiding in their homes, said Nunez.

Residents who attempt to sneak back will be stopped at checkpoints, he said.

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