

Giant ash cloud threatens flights in Pacific

May 31 2010

A giant plume of volcanic ash is disrupting flights in the Pacific and threatening villagers in Vanuatu, echoing similar problems which caused chaos in Europe, scientists and officials said Monday.

Forecasters in New Zealand said the cloud, spewing from Vanuatu's Mount Yasur volcano, was about 6,000 feet (1,800 metres) high and covered an area of about 132 square miles.

Tourists have been urged to stay away from the volcano on Tanna island, which has disrupted domestic flights in neighbouring New Caledonia.

Peter Korisa of the National Disaster Management Office, who is on Tanna to assess the situation, said lava and hot rocks had been spewing from the volcano and ash was raining down on nearby villages.

"There are 6,000 people in the villages around the volcano, we're not moving them out yet," Korisa told AFP.

"All tourists and tourist operators have been asked to not access the volcano. The access is restricted."

Tristan Oakley, an aviation forecaster with New Zealand's Meteorological Service, said authorities had issued an advisory and it was up to airlines to avoid the affected area or cancel flights if necessary.

The plume has forced New Caledonia's AirCal to cancel two internal

flights and delay another, although disruption remains tiny compared to the havoc seen in Europe -- including a week-long shutdown in the continent's north in April.

Air Vanuatu local supervisor David Dick said flights were still running between the South Pacific country's capital, Port Vila, and Tanna island, while tourism officials also said the industry was unaffected.

However, Australia on Friday issued a travel advisory saying visitors were now barred from the volcano.

"Public access to the [volcano](#) is now strictly prohibited and people living in the risk zone should move to safer areas," the advisory said.

Vanuatu, which sits on the so-called "Pacific Ring of Fire" known for its seismic and [volcanic activity](#), was rocked by a 7.2-magnitude earthquake on Friday, prompting a brief tsunami warning.

The archipelago, which lies between Australia and Fiji and north of New Zealand, was hit by three major quakes in October.

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