

Mexican volcano rumbles, but residents shrug it off

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Backdropped by Popocatepetl Volcano a farmer plows the land in San Nicolas de los Ranchos, in the state of Puebla, on May 14, 2013.

Mexico's Popocatepetl volcano has blown steam for days, prompting authorities to prepare for possible evacuations, but residents are used to their towering neighbor's rumblings and keep going to work without fear.

Popocatepetl, which means "smoking mountain" in the Nahuatl language of the Aztecs, spewed more steam, gas and ash that rose three kilometers (two miles) above the crater on Tuesday, according to the National Disaster Prevention Center.

The volcano, which is 55 kilometers (34 miles) southeast of Mexico City, has also rumbled and spewed molten rocks in recent days. Last week, it covered several towns in ash, including the capital of the state of Puebla.

Authorities have raised the alert level to "Yellow Phase Three," the fifth of a seven-stage warning system, restricting access to an area of 12 kilometers (7.5 miles) around the volcano and preparing evacuation routes.

But people living in the nearby town of Santiago Xalitzintla appear calm despite the surge in activity inside the 5,452-meter (17,887-foot) high volcano, known locally as "Gregorio" or "Don Goyo" and considered a magical rainmaker by indigenous populations.

"We go out, we look at it and we go back to sleep very soundly," said Guadalupe de Santiago, balancing a basket of candy on her head near a church in this town just 12 kilometers (7.5 miles) south of the volcano.

"(The volcano) takes care of us. Look at all the water he's sending us," she said as rain fell on her.

Hundreds of soldiers were sent to Santiago Xalitzintla and two other towns in case the volcano erupts and forces the evacuation of 11,000 residents in this area surrounded by corn fields and small cattle farms.

The soldiers checked the condition of roads in case they need to be used for an evacuation and the two shelters were set up in the state of Puebla

to house 5,000 people.

Around 4.5 million people live within 50 kilometers of Popocatepetl, which had its last [major eruption](#) in 2000, forcing thousands of people to evacuate from surrounding towns.

But few residents evacuated in May 2012 when the volcano belched out ash, forcing the Puebla airport to close temporarily.

"We won't go to the shelter again if they tell us the same thing," Santiago said.

"Things got stolen from our house last year. All our animals were gone and nothing had happened up there," she said, pointing at the crater.

Every March 12, dozens of residents climb part of the [volcano](#) in an annual ceremony, leaving flowers, food and drinks as offerings to ask "Gregorio" to produce rain.

"We celebrate his birthday and ask him for rain and a good harvest," said Juan Garcia Agustin, the town's top official.

Agustin, who has checked the dirt roads that will be used in case of an evacuation, said residents would take shelter set up inside a school gym in the town of Cholula if necessary. Some 100 cots were ready, with bags on top of them filled with hygiene products.

But the shelter's doctor on duty, Juan Manuel Garcia, said residents are loath to evacuate.

"People are reluctant to leave their homes because experience tells them that nothing even happened before and that nothing will happen if they disobey evacuation orders," he said. "However, if they risk losing their

animals and belongings, they'll listen."

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