

# Vanuatu orders evacuation of island with rumbling volcano

September 28 2017, by Nick Perry

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This Tuesday, Sept. 26, 2017 photo provided by the New Zealand Defense Force, shows huge columns of smoke, ash and volcanic rocks billowing from the crater of an erupting volcano on Vanuatu's Ambae Island. The erupting volcano has forced 6,000 people to flee their homes on the island of Ambae in Vanuatu where the volcano has been active since 2005, but a recent increase in activity has raised fears of a major eruption. (New Zealand Defense Force via AP)

Vanuatu officials on Thursday ordered the complete evacuation of an

island in the Pacific archipelago where a rumbling, belching volcano is threatening to blow.

Boats were soon to begin ferrying residents off Ambae island, which is home to about 11,000 people, in a process expected to take about a week. The Manaro volcano has been increasingly active for a week or more, raising fears of a major eruption.

Government spokesman Hilaire Bule said ministers decided they couldn't risk people's lives and so ordered the compulsory evacuation. Previously, people had been evacuated to other areas on the island itself.

Ambae resident Lilian Garae said she could see "smoke coming out from the hills" and hear regular booming noises from the volcano. She said she was waiting to hear when she might have to leave her home and where she might be sent.

Ambae is about 400 square kilometers (154 square miles), making it a little larger than the city of Detroit. It is one of about 65 inhabited islands in the Pacific nation about one-quarter of the way from Australia to Hawaii.

The activity measure of the volcano was raised last weekend to Level 4, on a scale in which Level 5 represents a major eruption, and an emergency was declared Monday.

New Zealand's military flew a plane over the volcano on Tuesday, and said huge columns of smoke, ash and volcanic rocks were billowing from the crater.

Some residents have left the island voluntarily. For them, it's a waiting game to see whether the volcano erupts or returns to normal activity that's not a threat. Officials say they have no real way of predicting what

the volcano will do next and that evacuees will just have to wait it out.

Bule said the evacuation will be carried out by boat and continue through Oct. 6. He said residents will be moved onto nearby islands. Officials are setting up two sites on Pentecost Island, he said, where evacuees will be housed in government buildings or in temporary camp sites.

Ambae island has long been volcanically active. A previous eruption in 2005 forced about 3,300 people to temporarily leave their homes and relocate elsewhere on the island, but didn't lead to an evacuation of the island itself.

Dickinson Tevi, a spokesman for the Vanuatu Red Cross Society, said the relief agency has been shipping water and shelter equipment to Ambae island.

"People are quite afraid with the sound of rumbling going on," he said. "They are very uncertain and afraid."

Bule said the government had allocated 200 million vatu (\$1.9 million) toward the evacuation effort and was deploying 60 police officers to help people leave and to ensure there was no looting.

"We've prepared for cyclones by putting evacuation centers on the island but we are not ready for a volcanic eruption," Bule said. "The government has to put a policy in place to cater for this in the future."

Vanuatu's Meteorology and Geohazards Department has previously warned that people nearest to the volcano face the biggest risk from airborne rocks and volcanic gas and that acid rain could damage crops across a broader area.

Vanuatu is home to about 280,000 people and is prone to natural

disasters, with a half-dozen active volcanoes as well as regular cyclones and earthquakes. It sits on the Pacific's "Ring of Fire," the arc of seismic faults around the Pacific Ocean where earthquakes and volcanoes are common.

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