

Vanuatu says most residents evacuated from belching volcano

October 4 2017, by Nick Perry



In this Oct. 2, 2017, photo provided by the International Red Cross, residents prepare to evacuate from Ambae Island in Vanuatu amid fears of a volcanic eruption. The evacuation of a Vanuatu island was continuing after scientists said an erupting volcano had stabilized. A makeshift fleet of vessels ranging from tiny water taxis to large landing craft was moving thousands of people from Ambae island to nearby islands in the Pacific archipelago. (Joe Cropp/International Red Cross via AP)

Vanuatu officials said Wednesday they have nearly completed the

evacuation of an island where a belching volcano has been threatening to blow.

Shadrack Welegtabit, the director of the National Disaster Management Office, said more than 11,000 residents of Ambae island have been moved to nearby islands in the Pacific archipelago.

He said only a handful of residents remain after refusing to leave.

"There is some resistance, but police are working on that," he said. "Everybody else is gone from the island."

He said the 100 police officers who were deployed to help with the evacuation and prevent looting would remove those who remained, by force if necessary.

Scientists said the Manaro volcano has stabilized from a more explosive state last week, when lava was interacting with water as it erupted.

But Vanuatu's Meteorology and Geohazards Department is still categorizing the activity as Level 4 on a scale in which Level 5 represents a major eruption.

Officials will likely wait until the volcano's activity level is downgraded before allowing people to return home. That could be days or months away, depending on what the volcano does next.

All sorts of vessels from water taxis to commercial ships have helped ferry people to nearby islands since officials gave the evacuation order last week.



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About two-thirds of evacuees have been moved to the island of Espiritu Santo, where they are being housed in churches, schools and in tents on sports fields. Others have been moved to Pentecost island and Maewo island.

Joe Cropp, a spokesman with the International Federation of the Red Cross who helped with the evacuation, said people left the island with what they could carry and are now in need of items like tarpaulins, sleeping mats and cooking equipment.

"The key is to start mobilizing resources," he said. "Santo has got a reasonable airport, but in other places it requires a bit more work."

Both New Zealand and Australia have been helping in the relief effort by providing supplies, expertise and money.

Vanuatu is home to 280,000 people and is particularly prone to natural disasters, with a half-dozen active volcanoes as well as regular cyclones and earthquakes.



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