

Volcanic eruption, ensuing chaos kill at least 15 in Congo

May 24 2021, by Justin Kabumba Katumwa



People gather on a stream of cold lava rock following the overnight eruption of Mount Nyiragongo in Goma, Congo, Sunday, May 23, 2021. The volcano unleashed lava that destroyed homes on the outskirts of Goma but the city of nearly 2 million people was mostly spared after the nighttime eruption. Residents of the Buhene area said many homes had caught fire as lava oozed into their neighborhood. Credit: AP Photo/Clarice Butsapu

Torrents of lava poured into villages after dark in eastern Congo with little warning, leaving at least 15 people dead amid the chaos and destroying more than 500 homes, officials and survivors said Sunday.

The eruption of Mount Nyiragongo on Saturday night sent about 5,000 people fleeing from the city of Goma across the nearby border into Rwanda, while another 25,000 others sought refuge to the northwest in Sake, the U.N. children's agency said Sunday.

More than 170 children were still feared missing Sunday, and UNICEF officials said they were organizing transit centers to help unaccompanied children in the wake of the disaster.

Goma ultimately was largely spared the mass destruction caused by the volcano's last eruption in 2002. Hundreds died then and more than 100,000 people were left homeless. But in outlying villages closer to the volcano, Sunday was marked by grief and uncertainty.

Aline Bichikwebo and her baby managed to escape when the [lava](#) flow reached her village, but said both her mother and father were among those who perished. Community members gave a provisional toll of 10 dead in Bugamba alone, though provincial authorities said it was too soon to know how many lives were lost.

Bichikwebo says she tried to rescue her father but wasn't strong enough to move him to safety before the family's home was ignited by lava.



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"I am asking for help because everything we had is gone," she said, clutching her baby. "We don't even have a pot. We are now orphans and we have nothing."

The air remained thick with smoke because of how many homes had caught fire when the lava came.

"People are still panicking and are hungry," resident Alumba Sutoye said. "They don't even know where they are going to spend the night."

Elsewhere, authorities said at least five other people had died in a truck crash while they were trying to evacuate Goma, but the scale of the loss had yet to be determined in some of the hardest-hit communities.

Residents said there was little warning before the dark sky turned a fiery red, sending people running for their lives in all directions. One woman went into labor and gave birth while fleeing the eruption to Rwanda, the national broadcaster there said.



Residents check the damages caused by lava from the overnight eruption of Mount Nyiragongo, seen in background, in Buhene, on the outskirts of Goma, Congo in the early hours of Sunday, May 23, 2021. Congo's Mount Nyiragongo

erupted for the first time in nearly two decades Saturday, turning the night sky a fiery red and sending lava onto a major highway as panicked residents tried to flee Goma, a city of nearly 2 million. Credit: AP Photo/Justin Kabumba



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People who fled to Rwanda during the overnight eruption of Mount Nyiragongo return to Goma, Congo in the early hours of Sunday, May 23, 2021. Congo's Mount Nyiragongo erupted for the first time in nearly two decades Saturday, turning the night sky a fiery red and sending lava onto a major highway as panicked residents tried to flee Goma, a city of nearly 2 million. Credit: AP Photo/Justin Kabumba



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Lava from the eruption of Mount Nyiragongo is seen in Buhene, on the outskirts of Goma, Congo in the early hours of Sunday, May 23, 2021. Congo's Mount Nyiragongo erupted for the first time in nearly two decades Saturday, turning the night sky a fiery red and sending lava onto a major highway as panicked residents tried to flee Goma, a city of nearly 2 million. Credit: AP Photo/Justin Kabumba



A person stands in front of lava from the eruption of Mount Nyiragongo, in Buhene, on the outskirts of Goma, Congo in the early hours of Sunday, May 23, 2021. Congo's Mount Nyiragongo erupted for the first time in nearly two decades Saturday, turning the night sky a fiery red and sending lava onto a major highway as panicked residents tried to flee Goma, a city of nearly 2 million. Credit: AP Photo/Justin Kabumba



People stand and take selfies in front of lava from the eruption of Mount Nyiragongo, in Buhene, on the outskirts of Goma, Congo in the early hours of Sunday, May 23, 2021. Congo's Mount Nyiragongo erupted for the first time in nearly two decades Saturday, turning the night sky a fiery red and sending lava onto a major highway as panicked residents tried to flee Goma, a city of nearly 2 million. Credit: AP Photo/Justin Kabumba

Smoke rose from smoldering heaps of lava in the Buhene area near the city Sunday.

"We have seen the loss of almost an entire neighborhood," Innocent Bahala Shamavu said. "All the houses in Buhene neighborhood were burned and that's why we are asking all the provincial authorities and authorities at the national level as well as all the partners, all the people

of good faith in the world, to come to the aid of this population."

Elsewhere, witnesses said lava had engulfed one highway connecting Goma with the city of Beni. However, the airport appeared to be spared the same fate as 2002 when lava flowed onto the runways.

Goma is a regional hub for many humanitarian agencies in the region, as well as the U.N. peacekeeping mission. While Goma is home to many U.N. peacekeepers and aid workers, much of surrounding eastern Congo is under threat from myriad armed groups vying for control of the region's mineral resources.

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