

Shaking roofs, frayed nerves as Mexico's 'Popo' volcano rumbles

May 25 2023, by Jose Osorio with Yussel Gonzalez in Mexico City



Mexico's Popocatepetl volcano spews smoke, ash and molten rock.

Miguel Angel Atenco tries to ignore the vibrations, falling ash and fiery night-time shows from the volcano towering over his Mexican town, and carry on selling tacos as usual.

Like others living in the shadow of Popocatepetl, located just 70 kilometers (about 45 miles) southeast of Mexico City, he is used to its periodic tantrums.

"We keep on working, just waiting to see what the [volcano](#) does," Atenco told AFP in his restaurant, in the ash-covered community of San Nicolas de los Ranchos, in the foothills of rumbling "El Popo."

"We have to clean up. We have to work, and everything's dirty," he added, after sweeping the ash from the sidewalk in front of his business again.

Since Friday, "Don Goyo" as the volcano is also known locally, has rattled nerves with several explosions and repeated emissions of ash, gasses and molten rock.

The increased activity caused dozens of flights to be canceled over the weekend out of Mexico City.

Shelters have been opened near Popocatepetl in case the situation escalates, while troops have been deployed and are helping to sweep up ash in the streets.

Roughly 25 million people live within a 100-kilometer radius of Popocatepetl, the second-tallest volcano in Mexico, rising nearly 5,500 meters (18,000 feet) above sea level.

On Sunday, authorities increased their warning level to one step below red alert, which, if reached, would mean evacuation for thousands like Atenco living near the volcano, whose name means "smoking mountain" in the indigenous Nahuatl language.



A man sweeps ash from a roof in a town near Mexico's Popocatepetl volcano.

'Capricious activity'

Although the volcano's explosions send chills down the spines of locals, the latest burst of activity is not very different than others seen since it awoke from decades of slumber in 1994, according to expert Juan Manuel Espindola.

Popocatepetl saw similar episodes in the late 1990s and early 2000s, although the current phase could potentially "go in a more dangerous direction," said the National Autonomous University of Mexico

researcher.

In 1997, intense activity blanketed parts of Mexico City in thick layers of ash, which can cause respiratory illness and clog drains.

Experts are constantly monitoring [seismic activity](#) around the volcano, as well as the composition of the materials and gasses it spews out, to try to predict a possible major eruption.

"Volcanoes have a somewhat capricious activity," Espindola said.



Popocatepetl is located just 70 kilometres (about 45 miles) from Mexico City.

President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador sought to calm [public concerns](#) on Wednesday, urging people "not to be alarmed."

"It seems that 'Don Goyo' is calming down, although it's still emitting ash," he said.

Authorities have warned people not to go within 12 kilometers (7.5 miles) of Popocatepetl, and to use [face masks](#) due to the falling ash.



Soldiers have been deployed in case evacuations are needed -- and to help clean up falling ash in the meantime.

Some residents living near Popocatepetl left over the weekend after [volcanic activity](#) caused their houses to vibrate, according to Raymundo Mena, a local church volunteer.

After a lifetime living in the foothills of the volcano, he tries to remain calm, despite the fact that in recent days "even the roofs were shaking."

"We're not going to be scared," he said.

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