

Swiss villagers told to evacuate over Alpine rockslide alert

May 10 2023, by Jamey Keaten



View of the village and the "Brienzer Rutsch", taken on Tuesday, 9 May 2023, in Brienz-Brinzauls, Switzerland. Authorities in eastern Switzerland have ordered residents of the tiny village of Brienz to evacuate by Friday evening because geology experts say a mass of 2 million cubic meters of Alpine rock looming overhead could break loose and spill down in coming weeks. Credit: Gian Ehrenzeller/Keystone via AP

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Local leaders said during a [town hall](#) and a media event Tuesday that residents would have to leave by 6 p.m. on Friday but could return to the [village](#) from time to time starting Saturday, depending on the risk level, but not stay overnight.

The centuries-old village straddles German- and Romansch-speaking parts of the eastern Graubunden region, sitting southwest of Davos at an altitude of about 1,150 meters (about 3,800 feet). Today it has under 100 residents.

The mountain and the rocks on it have been moving since the last Ice Age, local officials say. But measurements indicated a "strong acceleration over a large area" in recent days, and "up to 2 million cubic meters of [rock](#) material will collapse or slide in the coming seven to 24 days," officials said.

Over the last century, the village itself has moved a few centimeters (inches) each year, but the movement sped up over the last 20 years. The landslide has been moving about 1 meter (about 3 feet) per year. Geological surveys suggest the situation has become even more precarious.



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Christian Gartmann, a member of the crisis management board in the town of Albula, which counts Brienz in its municipality, said experts estimate there's a 60% chance that the rock will fall in smaller chunks, which may not reach the village or the valley. The landslide could also move slowly.

But there's also a 10% chance that the whole 2-million-cubic meter mass

may tumble down, threatening lives, property and the village itself, he said.

"We hope that the village stays intact," Gartmann said by phone. "We can't eliminate the possibility that it (the rock) will come down. ... It could damage the village or destroy it."

Gartmann said [glacier melt](#) had affected the precariousness of the rocks over millennia but that melting glaciers due to "man-made" climate change in recent decades wasn't a factor.



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A man holds his hand over his eyes during the information meeting for the population on the evacuation of the village of Brienz-Brinzauls under the "Brienzer Rutsch", in Tiefencastel on Tuesday, May 9, 2023. Switzerland. Authorities in eastern Switzerland have ordered residents of the tiny village of Brienz to evacuate by Friday evening because geology experts say a mass of 2 million cubic meters of Alpine rock looming overhead could break loose and spill down in coming weeks. Credit: Gian Ehrenzeller/Keystone via AP

Experts concluded that a controlled explosion to set off a rock slide was

too dangerous because it would require drilling under the rock—itsself a hazardous operation, Gartmann said. Erecting a giant pile of sand or a wall to try to hold back the rocks also wasn't considered feasible, he said, The wall would have to be at least 70 meters (230 feet) high to protect the village.

Many of the evacuees were expected to stay with family or friends, though local leaders have received offers from concerned neighbors to provide temporary housing. he said. At the current "orange" alert level, however, [farm animals](#) were to be left behind.

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Citation: Swiss villagers told to evacuate over Alpine rockslide alert (2023, May 10) retrieved 21 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-05-swiss-villagers-told-evacuate-alpine.html>

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