

Residents get brief return to volcano-risk Icelandic town

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Iceland has 33 active volcanic systems.

From Christmas gifts to sheep, residents forced from an Icelandic town damaged by hundreds of earthquakes in recent days were able to briefly return on Monday to retrieve their belongings, authorities said.

The southwestern town of Grindavik—home to around 4,000 people—was evacuated in the early hours of Saturday after magma shifting under the Earth's crust caused hundreds of earthquakes in what experts warned could be a precursor to a [volcanic eruption](#).

The [seismic activity](#) damaged roads and buildings in the town situated 40 kilometers (25 miles) southwest of the capital Reykjavik, an AFP journalist saw.

"Many roads are just wrecked. It's like a maze that you have to drive through," Johannes Daoi Johannesson, 34, told AFP on returning to the town.

"I was basically here just to empty my house as much as I could and take the essentials," he said, along with "something for the kids, Christmas presents."

After waiting for hours in their cars, residents could enter their homes for just a few minutes to collect their valuables, with Icelandic police and [civil protection](#) vehicles on standby.

"We ask everyone to take as short a time as possible," the country's emergency response department said in a statement, adding that it was limiting numbers to two people per vehicle.

'Considerable uncertainty'

An AFP journalist at the scene saw people filling their cars to the brim, with residents taking furniture, paintings and even sheep.

"We are a little bit desperate, a little bit paralyzed and sad, actually. If you start to think about all the time and energy you have put in building up your home, it's just sad," Hans Wierer, a local resident, said on

Sunday.

Iceland, which has 33 active volcanic systems, has declared a state of emergency, with shelters and help centers opened in several nearby towns.

"We have a fissure that's about 15 kilometers long, and anywhere on that fissure we can see that an eruption could happen," Vidir Reynisson, head of Iceland's Civil Protection and Emergency Management agency, told AFP on Saturday.

Such evacuations do not happen often, according to David McGarvie, a volcanologist at the University of Lancaster.

"The last evacuation of an entire sizeable settlement in Iceland occurred 50 years ago during the 1973 eruption on the island of Heimaey off the south coast of Iceland," he said.

"The displaced people of Grindavik will be understandably anxious because there is considerable uncertainty over the future of their town."

Grindavik is on the country's southwestern Reykjanes peninsula, home to the Fagradalsfjall volcano.

Three eruptions have taken place near Fagradalsfjall, in March 2021, August 2022 and July 2023—all far from any infrastructure or populated areas.

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