Highlights

- The Hunga Tonga-Hunga Taa’pai volcano is simmering down, but it left a shroud of ash over the mainland, floodwaters inland and caused damage to infrastructure, particularly in the small islands.
- Clean drinking water supply and environmental clean-up are among the priority humanitarian needs initially expressed.
- UNICEF is mobilizing emergency supplies prepositioned in the Australian humanitarian warehouse in Brisbane and the UNICEF warehouse in Fiji for immediate deployment to Tonga.

Situation Overview & Humanitarian Needs

Three days after the explosive eruption that triggered a tsunami, the Hunga Tonga-Hunga Taa’pai volcano in Tonga appears to be simmering down as the volcanic activity has been downgraded to Alert Level 3, meaning that eruption hazards are now confined near its vent. Communications to Tonga are still a challenge. While local telecommunications within the main island of Tongatapu have been restored, overseas communications still depend on a few satellite phones operating in the island. Early reports describe substantial ash coverage around Nuku’alofa, inundation of coastal areas and damage to some infrastructure. Two casualties were confirmed. While damage to agriculture is less than what was feared, concerns about water supply, air quality and availability of fuel have been raised. Outbreak of waterborne diseases is also feared as tidal surges caused flooding 2-3 blocks inland. Aerial surveillance showed significant infrastructure damage to small islands in the Haapai group, north of the capital. The main airport in the capital is not yet operational as the ash covering the runway is still being cleared. Repatriation flights from New Zealand and Fiji have also been cancelled because of the ash cloud. Entry to Tonga remains restricted because of COVID-19 protocols.

Humanitarian Leadership & Coordination

The Pacific Humanitarian Team (PHT), which is co-led by the UN Resident Coordinator’s Office (UNRCO) and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and composed of UN agencies and international NGOs, is leading the coordination with the Government of Tonga and the diplomatic missions. The PHT is based in Suva, Fiji. Under the PHT are nine clusters wherein UNICEF is the lead in Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), co-lead with Save the Children in Education, co-lead with World Health Organization (WHO) in Health & Nutrition and the lead for Child Protection in the Protection cluster.

The Government of Tonga has adopted a localized cluster approach with ten clusters, including Safety and Protection; Health, Nutrition and Water, Sanitation; and Education. All the clusters are led by government ministries and coordinated by the National Emergency Management Office (NEMO). NEMO reports to the National Disaster Council of the Cabinet. The PHT clusters provide a supportive role to NEMO and the Tongan clusters. The Government of Tonga convened their emergency meetings to assess the situation and identify the needs. They will inform the development partners on their
priorities and support needed once confirmed. The Prime Minister had individual meetings with each head of diplomatic missions in Tonga to discuss on their support.

UNICEF Programme Response (Summary Analysis)
UNICEF, as most other humanitarian agency, is facing serious hurdles in its immediate response to the Tonga crisis. UNICEF has no staff presence in Tonga. Tonga has kept its borders closed to ward off COVID-19. And with communications disrupted, there was a dearth of information on the situation and little opportunity to coordinate with partners on the ground.

Despite these difficulties, UNICEF set into motion a response that is based on available information and the brief coordination with government partners. Some 44 palettes of UNICEF emergency supplies prepositioned in the Australian Government’s humanitarian warehouse in Brisbane are being packed and loaded for shipment aboard HMAS Adelaide of the Royal Australian Navy which is being deployed on humanitarian mission to Tonga. Thanks to the Government of Australia for rending the free of charge transport of UNICEF supplies together with their supported supplies to Tonga. The UNICEF shipment is composed of WASH supplies and recreation kits. UNICEF is also exploring the delivery of more supplies from its Fiji warehouse, through the possible humanitarian flight being considered by the Logistics cluster, including satellite phones to help in the connectivity.

UNICEF has also initiated a discussion with Red-R Australia for the possible deployment of their in-country technical personnel to assist UNICEF operations, especially on WASH cluster coordination support and information management in Tonga.

WASH
1,000 sets each of family WASH and dignity kits, buckets, jerry cans, together with one portable water field testing kit, are being sent to Tonga through the HMAS Adelaide. Chlorine testers and water purification tablets from UNICEF’s Fiji stock are ready to be delivered once transport becomes available. The supervising Environmental Health Officer of the Ministry of Health has confirmed the need for these items which would complement the desalination machines being sent by the New Zealand and Australian Governments. In addition, the need for equipment and materials, including Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), for disinfection of inundated areas has been raised.

Health & Nutrition
The Central Warehouse where vaccines are kept, is thankfully left untouched. Outbreak of waterborne diseases is being feared because of the stagnant water left after the tidal surge. UNICEF is set to send midwifery kits, ORESOL (oral rehydration salts), emergency health kits and MUAC (mid-upper arm circumference) tape to Tonga, from its Fiji stock.

Child Protection
Some 50 recreation kits are being sent to Tonga through the HMAS Adelaide to help in the psychosocial activities for children that the Ministry of Internal Affairs will be encouraged to undertake through their church volunteers. Efforts are still being made to reach child protection partners in Tonga.

Education
The Ministry of Education still has UNICEF school tents and other school supplies stored in their warehouse. Efforts to reach the partner are being undertaken to identify any additional need, especially on school reopening after the summer holidays (end of January).

Social & Behavior Change
UNICEF activated the Pacific RCCE (Risk Communication and Community Engagement) Working Group to ensure coordination of messaging framework and dissemination around lifesaving preventive behaviors and practices focused on hygiene and safe water use, prevention of airborne diseases, and other vector borne diseases. Once the adaptation of the IEC (Information, Education, Communication) materials is completed, these will be shared with and used by all partners.

Human Interest Stories & External Media
UNICEF Pacific
https://twitter.com/UNICEFPacific/status/1483289919569403904
https://www.instagram.com/p/CY25gptNDPT/
https://www.facebook.com/unicefpacific/photos/a.484415085038/10160101740505039
Further Situation Reports will be released as the situation evolves and / or needs are identified.

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