Situation Overview

After weeks of volcanic activity emitting ash, the Hunga Tonga Hunga Ha’apai underwater volcano in Tonga erupted violently last Saturday (15 January). The eruption is said to be one of the biggest in Tonga in the last 30 years, with satellite imagery indicating a 5 km wide plume of ash, steam, and gas, rising approximately 20 km above the volcano. The volcanic eruption generated a 1.2-metre tsunami that crashed ashore in coastal areas of Tonga’s capital, Nuku’alofa.

The estimated population within 100 km of the volcano is 76,000 people. No official reports on the extent of injuries or damage have yet been released by the Tongan government. Tonga has been blanketed by 1-2 cm of volcanic ash, affecting the majority of the country and impacting on water and food supplies. Air quality is also of concern. Power has been disrupted, and communications with Tonga are a challenge as regular phone lines are down, the internet cable from Fiji to Tonga seems to have been damaged, and satellite phones are only working intermittently. Alert level 4 remains active for the volcano, meaning that eruption hazards are confined to areas near or around the volcano.

Following the volcanic eruption, a Pacific-wide tsunami alert was issued, sending governments to evacuate communities to higher ground or issue public advisories to stay away from the coast. In other countries, so far, no casualties and damage have been reported. However, the tsunami advisory to stay away from beaches and waterways, remains in effect for most Pacific countries.

In Fiji, several islands reported low-level tsunami causing flooding, strong currents, high waves, and / or presence of volcanic ash. In Samoa, some inundations of coastal areas were reported, but initial information indicates no major damage, injuries or casualties.

UNICEF Response

UNICEF Pacific is communicating with the Government of Tonga and civil society organizations (CSO) as well as other partners on the ground, to determine the impact of the tsunami and volcanic eruption, and possible assistance needed. The UNICEF Programme Emergency Response Team (PERT) held a first meeting today to share updates on the information available, and coordinate preparations for emergency assistance to be delivered once needs are confirmed by the government:

- UNICEF pre-positioned emergency supplies (e.g., WASH kits, water containers and buckets, water field test kits, tarpaulins, recreational kits, tents) are stored in the Australian humanitarian emergency relief supplies warehouse in Brisbane and UNICEF warehouse in Fiji and can immediately be mobilized.
- UNICEF has coordinated with the governments of Australia and New Zealand about any available flights to Tonga carrying their supply assistance to also transport UNICEF emergency supplies. Entry into Tonga remains restricted because of COVID-19.
- UNICEF is also in coordination with CSO partners in Tonga previously trained on WASH response and psycho-social support.
- Communication for Development (C4D) materials developed for the volcanic eruption of Ambae in Vanuatu (2017) is now being adapted to the Tonga context for re-production
- Regional WASH and Education Clusters are being activated by UNICEF as lead agency.

Further Situation Reports will be released as the situation evolves and / or needs are identified.
Whom to contact for further information:

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