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Pacific Islands Multi-Country Office

Humanitarian Situation in Tonga

Report No. 5

As of 04 February 2022 (4pm FJT)

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Highlights

- Tonga recorded its first COVID-19 community cases with two frontline workers at the wharf who tested positive, and subsequently 3 of their family members.
- A country-wide lockdown is in place as the Government of Tonga prioritizes containing the spread of the virus.
- A total of about 44 tons of UNICEF emergency supplies are now in Tonga.
- The airport in the capital Nuku'alofa may soon open for civil and commercial flights, but the borders remain closed for travelers.

Situation in Numbers



85,000 people
affected, including



36,500 children
(approx. 18,214
girls; 18,286 boys)

COVID-19 Cases- 5 (2 children)

Situation Overview & Humanitarian Needs

With Tonga still reeling from the impact of the eruption of Hunga Tonga-Hunga Haa'pai volcano and ensuing tsunami, another potential crisis is looming with the first recorded community transmissions of COVID-19. Two frontline workers at the wharf tested positive with the virus on 1 February, and the wife and two children of one of them also tested positive on 2 February. Contact tracing and isolation were immediately initiated for primary contacts. The Government declared a country-wide lockdown starting at 6 pm of 2 February, with its continuity to be assessed every 48 hours. Health authorities are bracing for more cases, while schools and offices are suspended, and no inter-island shipping is allowed during the lockdown period. Only humanitarian responders can go out of their homes during the lockdown as the government shifts its focus towards containing the virus.

More humanitarian supplies continue to arrive in the capital, Nuku'alofa, through contact-less drop-off and release. All shipments have to undergo disinfection and 72-hour quarantine before being moved. Distribution to communities however is suspended until the lockdown is lifted. Water continues to be the most expressed need. Tap water has been tested in Tongatapu and found to be safe by the Tonga Water Board whereas the Ministry of Lands and Natural Resources in Ha'apai found the water in Fono'i, Tungua and Nomuka to be contaminated with sea water and not fit for human consumption. Progress has been made to clear ash residue along the runaways and the national airport may soon be open to civil and commercial flights.

Funding Overview and Partnerships

Based on initial information as shared by the Government of Tonga and partners on the ground, UNICEF Pacific is appealing for USD 2.7 million to provide lifesaving support to children and their families in Tonga. This funding requirement is likely to increase once the Government of Tonga has released the results of the needs assessment.

UNICEF Pacific would like to express its sincere gratitude to the Government and the People of Japan for their generous contribution of USD 1.25 million towards the emergency response in Tonga, especially WASH and Health interventions. UNICEF also thanks to the Australian National Committee for UNICEF for the contribution of USD 105,000 in flexible funding and pledges to provide more in the coming days. Moreover, sincere gratitude is extended towards all donors who contributed to the Global Thematic Humanitarian Fund from which UNICEF Pacific received an allocation of USD 350,000 in flexible funding. These contributions will allow to cover a portion of the most pressing lifesaving needs.

However, currently a funding gap of USD 995,000 remains. UNICEF thanks donors who made firm pledges potentially allowing to respond to urgent needs in the sectors of WASH, Health, Social & Behavior Change, Education, and Child Protection (psychosocial support), as outlined in the appeal.

Humanitarian Leadership and 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 Tonga Government has formally made a request for assistance to the UN, the diplomatic missions, and the humanitarian community, and shared their initial list of supply needs for early recovery. The Government has not yet released the results of their immediate damage assessment.

UNICEF Programme Response

The initial batch of UNICEF emergency supplies delivered by HMAS Adelaide of the Royal Australian Navy has been cleared from quarantine at the docks and moved to government warehouses. The Ministry of Health (MOH) has already used some WASH and Dignity Kits from this shipment. The bigger batch of nearly 37 tons of UNICEF emergency supplies delivered through the Government of Fiji-chartered ship has also arrived in Tonga and is being cleared from quarantine. The supplies are in the process of being moved to the government warehouse for coordinated distribution after lockdown.

UNICEF now has 3 local consultants on board in Tonga, helping the overall coordination and providing technical support to Health, Nutrition and WASH. Two more international technical personnel on Social and Behavior Change and WASH cluster coordination are ready to fly-in once the Government of Tonga allows humanitarians to enter.

WASH

With the consolidated Initial Damage Assessment reports still to be released by the Government of Tonga, initial information indicates that approximately 50,326 people from 8,388 households need WASH assistance. The preliminary field information point to the western side of Tongatapu, Ha'apai, and 'Eua as the most affected areas. Provision of drinking water is ongoing through the Tonga Water Board, in coordination with the NEMO, with the desalination unit provided by the Government of New Zealand.

UNICEF WASH supplies, including WASH & Dignity Kits, jerry cans for household water storage, water testing kits, portable water testing equipment, water purification tablets, collapsible water containers, field latrines as well as safety gear for the health staff for supporting environmental cleaning efforts were part of the shipment that arrived from Fiji. However, the lockdown has suspended the distribution of these items. So far MoH have obtained 147 WASH kits for distribution. With support from UNICEF Supply Division, additional water testing kits, reagents, water purification tablets, and desalination units are being procured for immediate shipment to Tonga. UNICEF has contracted a WASH consultant in Tonga to support MoH and NEMO in the coordination of WASH interventions and to facilitate the distribution and use of UNICEF supplies. In addition, surge support on Cluster Coordination and Information management have also been confirmed for additional specialized support. UNICEF continues to work with key partners such as Pacific Community (SPC) and Massey University

(New Zealand) on the assessment of the volcanic ash's impact on water quality in Tongatapu, with results expected next week. This will provide valuable information with regards to the quality of available water at various points in Tonga.

[Health & Nutrition](#)

Part of the shipment that arrived from Fiji are UNICEF Midwifery kits, which include drugs and equipment, nutritional screening tools, basic IEHK (Inter-Agency Emergency Health Kits) and tents to set up temporary health clinics. To address the current COVID-19 community transmission, UNICEF provides 15,000 Antigen Rapid Diagnostic Tests (AgRDT) that are due to arrive in Tonga on 7 February 2022. UNICEF acknowledges the support of the governments of Australia and Fiji in the transport of these supplies to Tonga. UNICEF has procured PPEs in a value of approximately USD 300,000 including surgical and N95 masks, gowns, aprons, gloves, coverall, and face shields to protect the frontline workers from COVID transmission. A health and nutrition consultant is now on board in Tonga, who will provide on-site technical support to MOH.

[Child Protection](#)

A 15-member joint Health & Protection Cluster team provided psychosocial support (PSS) while distributing dignity kits in Tongatapu. A counselling team has also been activated on 'Eua providing PSS to population including children the tsunami-affected areas. Protection cluster members have travelled to the smaller Ha'apai group islands that are most affected by the tsunami to provide immediate PSS and to better understand the needs of the affected populations there. A two-week mission is now planned to follow up the Psychological First Aid (PFA) and PSS for the outer islands. 50 recreational kits for engaging children with therapeutic play arrived in Tonga and still await distribution once the lockdown is lifted.

[Education](#)

Most schools opened on 31 January 2022 but all of them have had to close down again because of the COVID lockdown starting on 2 February. Boats laden with supplies, including education supplies, and already on their way to Ha'apai, were called back to Tongatapu when the lockdown was declared. More education supplies like tents, ECD kits, recreation kits, WASH-in-schools kits, liquid detergents for handwashing, and water bottles have arrived in Tonga aboard the ship chartered by the Fiji Government.

[Social & Behavior Change](#)

MOH continues to provide daily updates about the emergency situation and promotion of health behaviors over national radio and television. The absence of a dedicated cost-free hotline for community complaints and feedback on emergency response has been raised as a constraint. Following the COVID-19 cases and subsequent lockdown, messaging on COVID-19 safe behaviors and vaccination has been intensified through radio, TV, and SMS. Health workers have engaged with contacts and families of positive cases through phone calls and providing necessary supplies. UNICEF has worked closely with the MOH health promotion team in monitoring the COVID-19 related queries on a national hotline as part of its social listening initiative. They will also be reaching out to the National Red Cross Society and other youth networks to further expand the outreach for gathering community feedback. UNICEF continues to monitor online and social media for rumor and misinformation tracking through the TalkWalker system.

[Human Interest Stories & External Media](#)

[Sione shares his experience of the volcanic explosion and tsunami in Tonga](#)

Further Situation Reports will be released as the situation evolves and / or needs are identified.

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