

Volcano on St Vincent and the Grenadines erupts

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Ash rises into the air as La Soufriere volcano erupts on the eastern Caribbean island of St Vincent. (Photo: Orvil Samuel/AP)

Kingston, April 9 (RHC)-- An explosive eruption rocked La Soufriere volcano on the eastern Caribbean island of St Vincent on Friday following mandatory evacuation orders from the local government.

Emergency management officials said the ash column rose about six kilometres (3.7 miles) high and that the ash was headed east into the Atlantic Ocean.

Dormant since 1979, the volcano started showing signs of activity in December, spewing steam and smoke and rumbling away. That picked up this week, prompting Prime Minister of St Vincent and the Grenadines Ralph Gonsalves to order an evacuation of the surrounding area late on Thursday.

Heavy ashfall also was reported in communities around the volcano, said Erouscilla Joseph, director of the University of the West Indies Seismic Center. "More explosions could occur," she said in a phone interview with The Associated Press, adding that it was impossible to predict whether they might be bigger or smaller than the first one.

There were no immediate reports of casualties from the eruption that occurred four days short of the 42nd anniversary of the last sizeable eruption.

In the coastal town of Barrouallie, about 14km (nine miles) from the volcano, evacuees trudged towards shelters carrying backpacks, duffel bags and shopping bags stuffed with personal belongings after the explosion. Some prepared to stay there, while others were expected to board cruise ships or go to nearby islands that have offered help.

The volcano last erupted on April 13, 1979, and a previous eruption in 1902 killed some 1,600 people.

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines Prime Minister Ralph Gonsalves said roughly 2,000 people were staying in the 20 shelters the government had opened. The new eruption followed mandatory evacuation orders issued on Thursday for the roughly 16,000 people who live in the red zone near the volcano in the island's northern region.

"We have had hiccups here and there ... but by and large we are proceeding pretty well," Gonsalves said. He later wiped tears from his eyes and apologised for crying while he thanked people and other governments in the region for opening their homes and countries to St Vincentians.

He said some 4,500 residents near the volcano had evacuated already via ships and by road. St Vincent and the Grenadines, located about 160 km (99 miles) west of Barbados, have a total population of just over 100,000 people.

Gonsalves said that depending on the damage done by the explosion, it could take up to four months for things to return to normal.

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