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Kinshasa, May 25 (RHC)-- Powerful aftershocks from the Mount Nyiragongo volcano have rocked the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) as the death toll from a recent eruption that left hundreds of families displaced rose to 32.

Three days after Africa's most active volcano roared back into life, tremors were shaking the region every 10 to 15 minutes on Tuesday morning. Cracks several centimetres (more than an inch) wide appeared in the ground and on roads in several areas, including near the main hospital in Goma, a city of some two million people which lies about 12 kilometres (seven miles) from Mount Nyiragongo.

"The situation in the city is confused. People don't know which way to go," a resident told AFP news agency. "Some are coming back, some are leaving, people are still afraid."

Tens of thousands of residents fled in panic, many of them to neighbouring Rwanda, when the volcano began erupting on Saturday evening. Two rivers of molten rock flowed from the volcano at a height of 1,800 metres (5,900 feet). One headed towards Goma, stopping at the very outskirts of the city.

It engulfed homes in its path, smothering the surrounding area with suffocating gas and cutting off the road between Goma and Butembo, the main highway in North Kivu province. "Thirty-two people died in incidents linked to the eruption, including seven people killed by lava and five asphyxiated by gases," the UN's refugee agency (UNHCR) said in a statement, raising an earlier toll – drawn from NGOs and other sources – of 20 dead.

"The lava flow stopped on Sunday, but there have been repeated earthquakes since the eruption and the lava lake in the volcano's crater appears to have refilled, prompting fears of new fissures opening or another eruption," it added, noting that a significant effort was under way to reunite several hundred children who were separated from their families as they fled.

Five people died from suffocation on Monday after they tried to cross the cooling lava some 13km (eight miles) north of Goma, civil society leader Mambo Kawaya told AFP.

Several strong aftershocks were also felt in Rwanda on Monday, including a magnitude 5.1 earthquake under Lake Kivu, the Rwanda Seismic Monitor said. A so-called stratovolcano nearly 3,500-metres (11,500 feet) high, Nyiragongo straddles a notorious rupture called the East African Rift. Its last major eruption, in 2002, claimed dozens of lives.

DRC authorities have urged the population to be vigilant and to avoid walking on the lava. "People who gather at the lava rocks without being certain that it is already solid, risk suddenly sinking inside," said Joseph Makundi, head of civil protection in North Kivu province.

Raphael Tenaud, deputy head of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) delegation in Goma, said lava had destroyed four large villages and damaged 12 others. Humanitarian groups estimate that between 900 and 2,500 dwellings were destroyed, he said, adding that this meant at least 5,000 people were without a home.

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