

Saint Vincent evacuating thousands as volcano erupts

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La Soufriere on the Caribbean island of St Vincent has erupted (Picture: @Exhausted33; @Mz_Collis)

Kingston, April 9 (RHC)-- Empty cruise ships are arriving at the eastern Caribbean island of Saint Vincent on Friday to help transport thousands of people evacuated under the fiery glow of La Soufriere volcano which officials said has now begun to erupt.

Earlier, on Thursday, Prime Minister of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines Ralph Gonsalves said the island was on red alert after a shift in volcanic activity at the crater of La Soufriere and told residents in northern areas to move to safety immediately.

"I have issued an evacuation order to all residents living in the RED ZONES on the North East and the North West of the island," he wrote in a tweet late on Thursday.

Shelters filled up overnight as people living in the northern part of the island sought safer ground with a string of car lights twinkling through the darkened mountains.

Roughly 16,000 people live in the red zone and required evacuation, Erouscilla Joseph, director of the University of the West Indies' Seismic Research Center, told The Associated Press news agency.

Many worried that evacuation efforts would be hampered by the pandemic, with Gonsalves noting that the cruise ships and other islands would require evacuees to be vaccinated. He also said he was working with other Caribbean governments to ensure that they could accept an identification card since not everyone has a passport.

He said two Royal Caribbean cruise ships and two Carnival Cruise Line ones are expected to arrive on Friday. Islands that have said they would accept evacuees include Saint Lucia, Grenada, Barbados and Antigua.

Scientists alerted the government about a possible eruption after noting a type of seismic activity early on Thursday that indicated "magma was on the move close to the surface," Joseph said. "Things are escalating pretty quickly," she said of the volcanic activity, adding that it was impossible to provide an exact forecast of what might happen in the next hours or days.

A team from the seismic centre arrived in Saint Vincent in late December after the volcano had an effusive eruption. They have been analysing the formation of a new volcanic dome, changes to its crater lake, seismic activity and gas emissions, among other things.

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

The eastern Caribbean is home to other active volcanoes. Seventeen of the region's 19 live volcanoes are located on 11 islands, with the remaining two underwater near the island of Grenada, including one called Kick 'Em Jenny that has been active in recent years.

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