

A situational update on the Democratic Republic of the Congo after volcanic eruption near Goma

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Eruption and Immediate Aftermath

On May 22, 2021, Mount Nyiragongo erupted near the densely populated city of Goma, the capital of the North Kivu province in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. Lava flows advanced toward neighborhoods north of the city's airport.¹

Shortly after the volcanic eruption, officials were concerned about displacement to and from Sake, an area northwest of Goma that is prone to cholera outbreaks.² With cases recorded in Sake before the eruption, officials worried that displacement from the eruption may fuel the spread of cholera into new areas.³ Some roadways were also damaged or cut off from the eruption, affecting humanitarian operations and raising concerns of higher food prices and transport costs.

Recent estimates indicate at least 32 people died directly from the eruption-- with 3,629 houses burned and seven schools destroyed from the lava flows.⁴ In total, the May 27 evacuation of ten neighborhoods of the city of Goma led to the immediate displacement of more than 230,000 people.⁵ OCHA estimates indicated around 63,000 of these persons were displaced to Sake—and another 53,000 fled to Rwanda.⁶ An International Organization for Migration estimate put the total number of displaced from the eruption at more than 415,000 people.⁷

Returns Begin Amid Water, Cholera Concerns

DRC Prime Minister Jean-Michel Sama Lukonde Kyenge announced on June 7 the return of displaced people to the city of Goma and the broader Nyiragongo territory with the end and solidification of the volcano's lava flows, as well as a significant decrease in local earthquake activity.⁸ According to the Congolese government, the gradual return of displaced persons to Goma will occur from June 8 through June 20, with persons returning from Sake first and those in Rwanda returning later.⁹ Congolese authorities announced that schools and universities would reopen June 14 after building inspections.

On June 8, North Kivu provincial authorities began supporting transportation efforts based on this schedule.¹⁰ While "a large movement of returns" is underway, some internally displaced persons who lost their homes in the eruption are remaining in Sake with no accommodations back in Goma. Sake authorities have committed to relocating these displaced persons to a collective center. As of June 8, about 1,340 unaccompanied children had been identified—with 1,101 of them reunited with their households. Water distribution networks remain damaged from the eruption—with more than 105,000 people relying on water tanking.¹¹ OCHA's next situation report will be published June 14.

Access to clean water and cholera transmission remain serious concerns as people displaced by the eruption return to their homes or other locations. The DRC is acutely vulnerable to humanitarian shocks, from the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic to displacement from ongoing civil conflict in the country.¹² The Norwegian Refugee Council recently estimated that some 5 million people are internally displaced within the DRC.¹³

Broader context: the DRC, conflict, and climate change

Mount Nyiragongo is located on the active Virunga volcanic chain, which lays at the confluence of the DRC, Uganda, and Rwanda.¹⁴ The volcano previously erupted in 2002, also forcing hundreds of thousands of people from their homes. Increased volcanic activity earlier this year suggested an eruption was possible, but the Goma Volcano Observatory's functions were hampered by funding cuts.¹⁵ Volcanic expert Paolo Papale, who has previously studied Mount Nyiragongo, said that local and national governments “need to be more aware of the risks from tectonic rifting and from the volcano” as early warning signs of future eruptions.¹⁶

These reflections—and what they mean for Goma—are particularly salient as internal conflict and natural disasters continue to fuel displacement within the DRC. Increasing militant violence in the country's east prompted the DRC to extend a “state of siege” martial law declaration to two more provinces, including North Kivu.¹⁷ While climate change is expected to affect disparate communities differently across the massive, sprawling DRC, increasingly unreliable harvests from changes in rainfall and more pronounced droughts are expected to threaten the DRC's food security and social development, which can serve as underlying causes for the migration and displacement of vulnerable groups.¹⁸

References

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