

Media Release
The Volcanic Eruption in Tonga
Thursday, 20th January 2022

The underwater volcano Hunga-Tonga and Hunga Ha'apai started its violent, volcano eruption on Monday, 20 December, sending ashes, steam and gas 18 km into the air. After several days, the fierce eruption of the volcano significantly died down, but stay active. This underwater volcano continued to erupt for almost four weeks. On Friday the 14th January, this underwater volcano fiercely erupted again, sending ashes, steam and cloud 20 km into the air, and then drifted and covered the whole Island.

On the same day, Friday the 15th January, the Tongan Meteorological Services issued a tsunami warning for all of Tonga, while the underwater volcano Hunga-Tonga and Hunga-Ha'apai continues erupting. Fortunately, Tonga has a National Plan for tsunami warning, and they had conducted rehearsals in national level this National Plan a few times. When this tsunami warning sounded, everybody in Tonga knew where to go and also what to take. At about 1700 hours in the evening, this violent underwater volcano eruption generated huge explosive-sounds that being heard 700 km in Fiji and also as far as Alaska. These violent explosive-sound and the fierce eruption of the volcano damaged the only submarine cable that connected Tonga to the rest of the world, and also triggered series of tsunami waves that washing ashore in a very high speeds.

These series of tsunami waves washing ashore rose up to 15 meters high, hitting harder the west coasts of Tongatapu (**the main Island**), 'Eua Island, and Ha'apai Island Group, caused lots of damages to all these areas. Some of the islands in these areas were submerses, many of the houses were either completely damaged or severely damaged, and lots of debris everywhere. In one village, 21 houses were completely damaged and 37 were severely damaged.

On Saturday night, the National Emergency Management Committee (NEMC) met and approved their immediate response to this natural disaster. In the following morning (**Sunday**), the Damage Assessment teams were sent to areas that were hit harder; the shops were opened for the people to purchase food supplies (**By law no business allowed to open on Sunday**); HMAF Navy Patrol Boats left early in the morning to conduct rescues operations for three people who were reported missing. Of those three, two was found alive and the other one is a British national, was unfortunately found dead; and many people returned to their homes. To date there are three people confirmed dead, including the British national. On Monday, all the Government employees were told to stay home and clean up their homes, and on Tuesday they were tasked to clean up their Government off ice-buildings; the Army, Police and volunteers were tasked to clean up the international airport; all the businesses were allowed to open; and the people who have returned to their respective villages, started cleaning up.

HMAF Navy boat together with their Barge left for Ha'apai Island Group with health teams, experts and much needed relief supplies such as water and food. All the houses in the smaller islands which were submerged were completely damaged. The evacuation and relocation

processes of people were also begun. Some of the people from the affected villages in the main island Tongatapu had also been evacuated to the evacuation centers, and are supplied with necessary relief items by the Government. The water supplies have been seriously affected by the ashes from the volcano. Government is working hard to ensure that the continuities and the supplies of enough and safe water for drinking are maintained.

As of today (**Thursday, 20th January 2022**), the two communications carriers in Tonga are working on satellite options to restore some services including internet. Priority is designated to the international connections and the communication services such as emails. Last night, many Tongans from around the world managed to make a short contact with their families in Tonga. Power in the main island has been restored to 80 percent. The Second Biggest Island Group, Vava'u was not affected by this volcano eruption.

The Government of Tonga has approved both New Zealand P3 Orion and the Australian P8 surveillance aircrafts to conduct the aerial surveillance flights, to assess the damages in Tonga. Two aircrafts are stand-ready to depart with humanitarian supplies to Tonga, subject to a formal request from the Government of Tonga, and also provided the condition of the airfield and runway is safe for landing. Australian Government has approved an initial A\$1million from their humanitarian funds to provide humanitarian relief and emergency supplies in response to the Tsunami in Tonga. NZ Government has also approved NZ\$1 million from their humanitarian funds to provide humanitarian relief supplies for Tonga.

The Chinese Embassy in Tonga has donated US\$100,000 as their initial humanitarian assistance to the disaster. China also planning to deliver a batch of disaster relief material to Tonga. The US Embassy in Suva has declared the disaster in Tonga, and donated US\$100,000 for their immediate response through USAID. Israel is exploring options to provide assistance through the Mashav and agency to Tonga.

Malo and thank you for the opportunity.

Note: Tonga has three main Island Groups: the Tongatapu Island Group to the south; Vava'u Island Group to the north (Next biggest Island); and the Ha'apai Island Group in the middle. There are 172 islands in Tonga covered an area of 700 square km.