

Montserrat volcano rumbles, governor orders evacuations

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The Soufriere Hills Volcano that destroyed this Caribbean island's capital in 1997 shot a cloud of ash more than 8km into the sky, prompting evacuation orders for some homes.

Le volcan Soufriere Hills, qui a détruit la capitale de l'île de Montserrat (Plymouth) en 1997, a expulsé un nuage de cendres à plus de 8 km dans les airs, forçant à évacuer certaines habitations.

With more volcanic activity likely, Montserrat's British governor ordered the evacuations and said police would enforce the decision.

Monday's blast, accompanied by increased seismic rumbling, released gases and steam from inside a lava dome that has grown rapidly over the last week, said Vicky Hards, director of the Montserrat Volcano Observatory.

"I think it was a warning call ... of what it can do," Hards said.

The explosion around sunrise also sent a flow of volcanic material cascading 3km down the volcano's northwest flank, but did not threaten any of the British island's 5,000 inhabitants, Hards said. Sirens alerted people to listen to the radio for updates.

L'explosion s'est produite aux environs de l'aurore et a produit des coulées pyroclastiques qui ont dévalé les pentes NO du volcan sur 3km de longueur. Elles n'ont menacé aucun des 5000 habitants. Les sirènes ont averti les gens afin qu'ils écoutent la radio pour prendre connaissance des mises à jour concernant l'éruption.

The government has advised about 50 households on the northwestern side of the volcano's base that their homes would be at risk from blistering gas and debris if the dome collapses. Officials conducted door-to-door briefings in the low-lying Belham Valley over the weekend.

Le gouvernement a averti 50 propriétaires d'habitations situées sur le versant NO du volcan que leurs maisons pourraient risquer d'être menacées par des gaz et des débris originaires des effondrements du dôme de lave. Pendant le dernier WE (6-7/1), les autorités ont réalisé des séances d'information de porte à porte dans la zone habitée du bas de la vallée Belham.

Governor Deborah Barnes Jones signed an evacuation order making it illegal for people to remain in that area as of Monday evening.

Le Gouverneur D.B.Jones a signé un ordre d'évacuation rendant illégal pour toute personne de rester dans la zone considérée dangereuse.

"People in the affected area know who they are and should work urgently on packing up and arranging for alternative accommodations," she said in a radio address.

"It will be an offense to be in the unsafe zone, and the police will prosecute offenders," Barnes Jones added.

Wind blowing from the east pushed the dark gray ash over the "exclusion zone," a barren, uninhabited area extending from the 900m high volcano across the southwest to the coast. Open water lies west of the island.

A hotel located near the exclusion zone has already emptied, and only "a handful" of residents were believed to still be living in the threatened area, said Mark Twigg, head of the governor's office.

"This causes genuine hardship for people who have to leave, and this is taken lightly by nobody," he said.

The volcano's latest burst of activity began on Dec. 24. Glowing streaks of red from the pyroclastic flows have created nighttime spectacles visible across much of the island. The volcano's rising dome remained in place after Monday's explosion, raising fears of a bigger event soon.

La dernière éruption a eu lieu le 24 décembre dernier en produisant des lueurs rouges spectaculaires, originaires de coulées pyroclastiques, visibles de la plupart des endroits de l'île de Montserrat.

"The flows also could have opened a line to go farther down the valley," Twigg said.

Les coulées pourraient avoir ouvert une entaille susceptible de les faire dévaler plus bas dans la vallée Belham a déclaré Twigg.

The Soufriere Hills Volcano became active in 1995, and more than half the territory's 12,000 inhabitants moved away. An eruption in 1997 buried much of the south, including the capital of Plymouth, and killed 19 people.

Le volcan de Soufriere Hills s'est réveillé en 1995, et plus de la moitié des 12000 habitants de l'île ont été déplacées. En 1997, une éruption a enseveli la plupart de la partie Sud de l'île, incluant la capitale de Plymouth et a tué 19 personnes.

Since then, the mountainous, teardrop-shaped island has gone on a building binge. A new city center is planned for Little Bay, the future capital, in northwest Montserrat. The island already has a new airport to replace the one that was engulfed by lava.