Tonga – Volcanic Eruption/Tsunami

ETC Situation Report #8
Reporting period: 3 – 9 March 2022

The ETC in the Pacific was activated in 2016 under the structure of the Pacific Humanitarian Team (PHT) to support telecommunications preparedness in the region. The ETC in the Pacific is currently supporting the response to the eruption of the Hunga-Tonga-Hunga-Ha-apai underwater volcano and subsequent tsunami which hit Tonga on 15 January 2022.

Highlights

- Although international communications on the main island of Tongatapu are restored, the domestic section of undersea cable which links Tongatapu to the outer islands of Ha'apai and Vava'u was also severed during the eruption and may take much longer to repair—up to late 2022.

- The ETC in the Pacific and national authorities in Tonga are refocusing coordination efforts to provide emergency telecommunications services for responders and the affected populations on the outer islands of Tonga.

Affected communities access news from home via the ITU satellite phone in Vava'u, managed by the National Emergency Management Office (NEMO) of Tonga. Photo: Tonga NEMO

- Two high-capacity satellite connectivity kits sent to Tonga by ETC partner, the Government of Luxembourg, are in country and awaiting release from the quarantine facility. The kits will be installed to provide connectivity with the outer islands.

Situation overview

NASA has confirmed that the Hunga-Tonga-Hunga-Ha'apai undersea volcano eruption on 15 January is recorded as the highest plume in satellite records. The eruption produced a tsunami that devastated parts of Tonga. The Government of Tonga remains in a state of emergency since 16 January.

Communities in Tonga will require humanitarian assistance until at least mid-2022. Recent assessments indicate that agriculture, food, livelihood, protection, shelter, and WASH assistance remain priority needs across Tonga, particularly on 'Eua Island and in the Tongatapu and Ha'apai island groups.

The rapid transmission of COVID-19 continues to prompt widespread restrictions, hindering relief actors' ability to deliver critical humanitarian assistance. Lockdown restrictions will continue on Tongatapu and Vava'u until 13 March, although some measures are being eased.

All relief items delivered in Tongatapu continue to be held in the government relief supply warehouse for 72 hours before being released.

Communications in Tonga

International communications are restored in Tongatapu, as of 22 February. Services of the two national providers in Tonga—Digicel and the Tonga Communications Corporation (TCC)—are available to use.

Communications with the outer islands of Ha'apai and Vava'u are not yet restored. The domestic section of undersea cable which links Tongatapu to these outer islands was severed during the eruption and will take until late 2022 to repair.

ETC Activities

Coordination

The ETC in the Pacific continues to coordinate the emergency telecommunications response in Tonga alongside Tonga's Ministry of Meteorology, Energy, Information, Disaster Management, Environment, Climate Change and Communications (MEIDECC).

Coordination efforts are being refocused to provide access to means of communication to support the response in the outer islands of Ha'apai and Vava'u.

The ETC in the Pacific has mobilized a partnership agreement to onboard an additional staff member who will remotely support coordination of the ETC response plan for up to six months, while the emergency in Tonga is ongoing.

Connectivity services

The two VSAT satellite connectivity kits dispatched by ETC partner, the Government of Luxembourg, have been airlifted from the Amberly Airbase in Brisbane to Tonga by the Australian Defence Force (ADF). The kits are scheduled for release to MEIDECC from the government quarantine warehouse on 11 March.

When released, the VSAT kits will be installed to establish reliable and high capacity connectivity with the outer islands for use by responders and affected communities. Three add-on modems, dispatched from Luxembourg, are expected to arrive in Tonga on 25 March to further augment the capacity of the VSATs.

The ETC in the Pacific and Télécoms Sans Frontières (TSF) are working to resolve a SIM-related issue in one of the two portable BGAN terminals providing connectivity to government responders in the MEIDECC District Emergency Management Committee (DEMC) facility in Vava'u. TSF provided the SIM card data for the BGANs.

The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) is on standby to ship further BGAN terminals to Tonga to support the response. The ETC in the Pacific is coordinating with MEIDECC to confirm whether additional terminals are required at this stage of the response.

The VSAT connectivity solution deployed to Tonga by the University of the South Pacific (USP) has been set up in the USP campus in Nuku'alofa. The VSAT solution will provide back-up connectivity for users of the network on campus.

Voice services

There are a total of nine satellite phones deployed in Tonga as part of the ETC response, all assigned to government responders. Three were dispatched by WFP in Fiji while six were sent by ITU. All are equipped with free airtime from Iridium.

Two WFP satellite phones are assigned to the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister on Tongatapu, and one WFP satellite phone is assigned to the MEIDECC National Emergency Recovery Committee (NERC) on Vava'u.

One ITU satellite phone is assigned to the head of MEIDECC on Tongatapu, and two ITU satellite phones are assigned to NEMO and the Ministry of Health on Vava'u. The three remaining ITU satellite phones are awaiting distribution to NEMO, the Ministry of Health, and the Governor's office on Ha'apai, once travel restrictions are lifted.

Radio communications services

Alongside regional and global partners, the ETC in the Pacific continues to plan for the project to enhance and expand the VHF and HF radio communications network across six island groups— Tongatapu, 'Eua, Ha'apai, Vava'u, Niuatoputapu, and Niuafo'ou. The project will enable more effective communications with the outer islands for the current, as well as future emergencies.

The Fast IT and Telecommunications Emergency and Support Team (FITTEST) staff member identified to deploy to Tonga for three months to initiate the technical work for this project has been re-routed to support the response in Ukraine. The ETC in the Pacific will proceed with activating partnership agreements to fill this need.

Information

The ETC Dashboard on the response in Tonga can be seen here.

ITU is mapping the status of connectivity in Tonga via the Disaster Connectivity Map (DCM).

Funding

The ETC and partners are using existing communications equipment in stock and in-kind contributions from partners to support the response in Tonga.

On 15 February, funding of US$250,000 was confirmed from the Central Emergency Relief Fund (CERF) to support the ETC in the response to the volcano eruption and subsequent tsunami in Tonga.

A further contribution of US$217,000 has been received from the Government of Japan to support the response.

Challenges

Logistics challenges continue to impact on the timely shipment of equipment to Tonga, including disruptions in global supply chains, issues with import levies, and the availability of flights for cargo.

COVID-19 continues to impact on the movement and availability of ETC focal points in country.

The conflict in Ukraine is impacting on airspace to ship equipment and the availability of emergency responders to deploy.

Meetings

A Global ETC Joint teleconference will take place on **Wednesday 16 March 2022** at **06:00 UTC**.

Contacts

NAME	POSITION	LOCATION	CONTACT
John Dovale	ETC Coordinator	Auckland, New Zealand	john.dovale@wfp.org
Salma Farouque	ETC coordination support	Melbourne, Australia	salma.farouque@wfp.org
Elizabeth Millership	Information Management Officer	Dubai, UAE	elizabeth.millership@wfp.org

All information related to the ETC response in Tonga can be found on the website:

www.etcluster.org/emergency/tonga-volcanic-eruptiontsunami

For more information or to be added or deleted from the mailing list please contact:

pacific.etc@wfp.org