

Tonga – Volcanic Eruption/Tsunami

ETC Situation Report #9

Reporting period: 10 March – 18 May 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 the subsequent tsunami which hit Tonga on 15 January 2022.

Highlights

- Replacement cable is estimated to reach Tonga by late September to repair the domestic section of undersea communications fibre cable, damaged during the January volcanic eruption. Until the cable is repaired, access to communications on the outer islands of Ha’apai and Vava’u remains severely limited.
- The ETC in the Pacific is working with the Government of Luxembourg, WFP FITTEST, and local satellite service providers to roll out the best solutions to provide connectivity on the outer islands of Ha’apai and Vava’u.
- A technical specialist has been identified to deploy to Tonga to support ETC coordination, install a HF & VHF radio network across six islands, support installation of connectivity solutions in the outer islands, as well as to build the technical capacity of national responders on the ground.



The distribution of relief items is ongoing in remote outer islands of Tonga, including Ha’apai, which was severely impacted in the January disaster. Photo: Fiji Red Cross

Situation overview

Both Tonga and Fiji experienced a minor earth tremor on a scale of 3.6 to 3.9 on 13 May. The impact was felt in Fiji, 120 kilometres from the epicentre. The situation is being closely monitored.

The state of emergency as it relates to the event of the Hunga-Tonga-Hunga-Ha’apai undersea volcano eruption and subsequent tsunami on 15 January has now ended, and the operation is moving from the response to the recovery phase. The distribution of relief items is ongoing in the Ha’apai island group.

The state of emergency as it relates to the COVID-19 pandemic has been extended in Tonga until 6 June, due to the continued rise in infection rates. The Ha’apai island group—which was heavily impacted by the volcanic eruption and tsunami—is under lockdown to contain the spread of the virus following an outbreak in April. The lockdown continues to impact on the deployment of communications equipment to Ha’apai.

Communications in Tonga

International communications have been restored in Tongatapu since 22 February when the **international section** of undersea communications fibre cable—severed during the eruption—was repaired. Services of the two national providers in Tonga—Digicel and the Tonga Communications Corporation (TCC)—are available to use.

Progress is now ongoing to repair the **domestic section** of undersea communications fibre cable, which was also damaged during the eruption. Approximately 110 kilometres of replacement cable is being manufactured and is expected to be shipped to Tonga to facilitate the repairs in late September. Until the cable is repaired, access to communications for responders and affected communities on the outer islands of Ha’apai and Vava’u remains severely limited.

The ongoing volcanic activity in the region may impact on efforts to fully repair the domestic communications cable.

ETC Activities

Coordination

The ETC in the Pacific continues to coordinate closely with the Tongan Ministry of Meteorology, Energy, Information, Disaster Management, Environment, Climate Change and Communications (MEIDECC) and the National Emergency Management Office (NEMO) for the emergency telecommunications response in Tonga.

A technical specialist has been identified from NORCAP¹ to deploy to Tonga in late May/early June on a 90-day mission to support local ETC coordination, deploy and install a HF & VHF radio network across six islands, support the installation of connectivity solutions on the outer islands and build the technical capacity of national responders on the ground. The specialist is conducting pre-deployment technical preparations remotely in coordination with the ETC in the Pacific and MEIDECC, until deployment is possible.

Data connectivity

The two emergency.lu VSAT satellite connectivity kits dispatched by ETC partner, the Government of Luxembourg, have been repositioned in Tonga since March. Three add-on modems to operationalize the VSATs were lost by the carrier during transit to Tonga. The ETC in the Pacific is working with the Government of Luxembourg, WFP FITTEST, and satellite service providers to find alternative solutions to operate the VSATs and/or provide other connectivity services options. This includes the ETC in the Pacific looking into procuring the commercial services of a local satellite provider for up to four months. In parallel, the teams are preparing new modems to ship to Tonga as soon as possible to activate the emergency.lu in-kind connectivity services for the remaining duration of the response. The solutions are to provide access to connectivity services for responders and affected communities on the outer islands of Ha’apai and Vava’u.

Radio communications

Radio communications equipment has been sourced and is being tested prior to dispatch to Tonga to augment the VHF coastal radio network and to establish a new, more resilient HF radio network across six island groups—Tongatapu, ‘Eua, Ha’apai, Vava’u, Niuatoputapu, and Niuafu’ou. The technical

¹ Operated by the [Norwegian Refugee Council](#) (NRC).

specialist will set up the equipment during his mission to Tonga and train national responders in maintaining and using the equipment.

The ETC in the Pacific is procuring nine laptops and one tablet device to equip MEIDECC technical and operational teams with the tools to monitor, manage, and maintain the operational status of the HF & VHF radio networks, as well as serve as tools for improved information management in MEIDECC's department of communications.

Voice services

The ETC in the Pacific is working with Iridium to prepare a further six satellite phones for deployment to Tonga to equip each of the six planned remote HF radio base stations. Global supply chain shortages will impact on the manufacturing timeframe of the satellite phones, which are estimated to be ready by July.

Unmanned Aircraft System (UAS)

Two Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS)—commonly referred to as drones—are in transit to Fiji for onward shipment to Tonga, coordinated by the ETC in the Pacific at the request of Tonga NEMO. The drones will enable government capacity to conduct damage assessments during emergencies. There is a need for advanced training for government staff to operate the equipment. The ETC is facilitating discussions between the Ministry of Communications and national clusters for them to develop existing capacity with national actors.

Information

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 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 the movement of equipment to and within Tonga.

Meetings

A Global ETC Joint teleconference will take place on **Wednesday 15 June 2022** at **06:00 UTC**.

Contacts

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

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

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