State of emergency declared in Iceland after volcanic eruption

By Kathryn Armstrong and Ian Casey on 8 Feb 2024

A state of emergency has been declared in Iceland after lava from a volcanic eruption damaged key hot water pipes.

Thousands of people in the Reykjanes Peninsula have been urged to limit their hot water and electricity use as the pipes could take days to fix.

There are concerns that other crucial pipelines close to the Svartsengi power station could be affected if the lava flow does not ease soon.

It is the third such eruption on the peninsula since December.

Aerial video of the area shows a new 3km-long (1.8 mile) fissure - a crack in the Earth's surface - spraying streams of lava high up into the air.

Smoke illuminated by the lava could be seen in the capital, Reykjavik - roughly 40 km (25 miles) away.

The Blue Lagoon, one of Iceland's top tourist attractions, has been forced to close again due to the lava flows. It is expected to remain closed on Friday.

Iceland's Department of Civil Protection and Emergency Management said it was trying to figure out how to guarantee the hot water supply to more than 20,000 people who have reportedly had their access disrupted.

Schools in the areas affected by the lack of hot water will also remain shut, the Icelandic National Broadcasting Service (RUV) reported.

RUV also said that the Keflavik Airport had been impacted but that its services were running as usual.

Volcanologist Dr Evgenia Ilyinskaya told the BBC that while the Svartsengi power station itself is protected to some extent by barriers that have been built around it, there are pipes providing hot water to a further 30,000 people across the peninsula that are at more immediate risk.

However, she said the hope was that the speed of the lava flow would soon drop off, in a similar way to earlier eruptions, and the pipeline would be undamaged.

According to the Icelandic Meteorological Office, the strength of the eruption is decreasing.

Smoke from the eruption could be seen from the capital, Reykjavik. (Source: BBC)

All of the recent eruptions in southern Iceland have involved lava pouring from fissures, rather than volcanic explosions that cause ash to be sent into the atmosphere - such as the country saw in 2011.

Dr Ilyinskaya, an associate professor of volcanology at Leeds University, said Thursday's eruption was in the same general area as one in December - meaning it is unlikely to cause more damage to the abandoned town of Grindavik.

Three homes in the town were destroyed last month when molten lava spewed through two other fissures.

Some of the around 4,000 residents of Grindavik have told the BBC they do not expect to ever return to live in their homes.

Iceland has 33 active volcano systems and sits over what's known as the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, the boundary between two of the largest tectonic plates on the planet.

The last time the Reykjanes Peninsula had a period of volcanic activity was 800 years ago - and the eruptions went on for decades.

This is now the sixth eruption since 2021, and scientists believe that the area is entering a new volcanic era.

"This is proceeding as expected at the moment," Professor Tamsin Mather, a volcanologist from the University of Oxford, said of the volcanic activity.

"What we're expecting is a series of these relatively small, relatively short-lived eruptions, pushing out lava flows through fissures and building up the peninsula further."

The question is how long such activity will go on for. Scientists think it could last for many years or even centuries.

Discussion Qns:

1. *What are the social impacts of a volcanic eruption on the population in Iceland?*
2. *What are some preparedness measures that can be taken to reduce the impact of volcanic eruptions?*