

Tonga – Volcanic Eruption/Tsunami

ETC Situation Report #5

Reporting period: 8 – 16 February 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

- On 10 February, a technical team was deployed by national ETC lead—the Tongan Ministry of Meteorology, Energy, Information, Disaster Management, Environment, Climate Change and Communications (MEIDECC)—to the remote island group of Vava’u, where access to communications has remained limited since the volcano eruption.
- As a result of the deployment, the MEIDECC District Emergency Management Committee (DEMC) facility in Vava’u has been equipped with two BGAN terminals for internet connectivity as well as a satellite phone sent by WFP in Fiji.
- Reports from partners in Tonga indicate that CS Reliance—the ship dispatched to repair the undersea communications cable severed in two places during the eruption—is making good progress in repairing the damage. The repair work is estimated to be completed by 20 February. It has not been confirmed if the repairs will fully re-establish both international and domestic communications in Tonga.



Tonga NEMO receives activated BGANs to provide connectivity during deployment to island group of Vava’u. Photo: Feleti Tu’ihalamaka/Tonga MEIDECC

Situation overview

Tonga is under a dual state of emergency since the eruption of the Hunga-Tonga-Hunga-Ha’apai volcano on 15 January, as well as two confirmed cases of COVID-19 on 1 February. The main island of Tongatapu remains under lockdown until 20 February in an effort to contain the spread of the virus. The National Emergency Operations Centre (NEOC) responding to the volcano and tsunami disasters is including relief distribution to those isolating at home in Tongatapu as a result of close contact with any potentially positive COVID-19 cases.

Vava’u island group—situated 314 kilometres north east of Tongatapu—is also currently under lockdown after reporting six COVID-19 cases. Vava’u has been severely impacted by the lack of access to communications since 15 January.

All relief items delivered in Tongatapu continue to be held in the government relief supply warehouse for 72 hours before being released, as part of the government’s contactless response.

Communications in Tonga

Reports from partners in Tonga indicate that CS Reliance—the ship dispatched to repair the undersea communications cable severed in two places during the eruption—is making good progress in repairing the damage. The repair work is estimated to be completed by 20 February. However, it has not been confirmed how this will impact on the full restoration of both international and domestic connectivity services from and within Tonga.

Until the undersea communications cable is fully repaired, national service providers—Digicel and the Tonga Communications Corporation (TCC)—are only able to partially restore its services with the use of back-up satellite communications. Limited international and domestic communications are being provided by the two service providers, including voice calls, data, and SMS.

Most access to connectivity is found on the main island of Tongatapu. The outer, more remote islands of Tonga have suffered from a lack of communications since the undersea communications cable was damaged on 15 January.

ETC Activities

Coordination

The ETC in the Pacific will continue to support the response in Tonga alongside national, regional and global partners until national communications services are fully restored. The emergency telecommunications response in Tonga is led by the national ETC lead—the Tongan Ministry of Meteorology, Energy, Information, Disaster Management, Environment, Climate Change and Communications (MEIDECC), and the ETC in the Pacific.

Voice services

Three satellite phones dispatched by WFP in Fiji have been activated and issued to key stakeholders in the Tongan government, including the Prime Minister, the deputy Prime Minister, and MEIDECC, to facilitate critical information sharing and coordination of the response.

MEIDECC has assigned one satellite phone to its technical team which deployed to Vava'u on 10 February.

Six satellite phones dispatched by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and three SIM cards (to equip the three WFP satellite phones already in Tonga) were expected to arrive in Tonga on 16 February. The shipment will undergo the three-day quarantine period before being released to MEIDECC. The satellite phones are credited with pre-paid airtime by Iridium.

Connectivity services

The MEIDECC technical team which deployed to Vava'u on 10 February was also equipped with two of the portable BGAN satellite terminals sent by the ETC from Fiji. The BGANs are now providing connectivity in the MEIDECC District Emergency Management Committee (DEMC) facility in Vava'u.

The third BGAN will be activated for humanitarian coordination purposes by staff in the UN Resident Coordinator's Office (RCO) in Nuku'alofa.

All three BGAN terminals are equipped with data provided by Télécoms Sans Frontières (TSF).

The BGANs are being activated with remote support assistance from WFP in Fiji.

The VSAT connectivity kit deployed to Tonga by the University of the South Pacific (USP) has been released from the quarantine warehouse facility on Tongatapu where it had been held since 6 February, following a delay related to COVID-19. The equipment is now at the USP campus in Nuku'alofa awaiting activation to provide a common communications area for responders to communicate internationally. Installation of the equipment is facing delays due to movement restrictions caused by the current COVID-19 lockdown.

Two Government of Luxembourg 'flyaway' VSAT kits for connectivity are scheduled to deploy from the WFP UAE warehouse on 18 February. The shipment will travel via the landing stage in Brisbane, subject to the next available airbridge to Tonga provided by the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF). Additional satellite modems to accommodate expanded connectivity capacity are being shipped directly to Tonga from Luxembourg. The Government of Luxembourg, SES, WFP's Fast IT & Telecommunications Emergency & Support Team (FITTEST), and the ETC in the Pacific held a technical deployment briefing with Tonga MEIDECC on 16 February on setting up the equipment. When received, the kits will provide connectivity services to support the response for an initial three months.

The ITU regional office supporting the Pacific continues to provide data connectivity services to the Tonga Meteorological Services in Fua'amotu International Airport via a prepositioned VSAT and with partnership from Intelsat.

In addition, ITU has set up VSAT equipment in the Tonga Geological Services (TSG) centre in Nuku'alofa. The Tongan Ministry of Communications is in the process of activating this connectivity capacity via assistance from national service providers, Intelsat, and Spark New Zealand.

Radio communications services

As requested by NEMO in Tonga, the ETC in the Pacific is finalizing equipment requirements with WFP FITTEST to strengthen the HF radio network in six locations in Tonga—Tongatapu, 'Eau, Ha'apai, Vava'u, Niuatoputapu and Niuafu'ou island groups—to enable more effective communications with the outer islands. The project scope also includes support from the ETC in the Pacific to restore the existing government-owned VHF radio communications network.

Staffing

A WFP FITTEST telecommunications specialist has been identified to deploy to Tonga for three months to provide coordination support, manage the implementation of the HF and VHF radio networks, and support the activation of the satellite connectivity equipment being deployed by the Government of Luxembourg, when received in country.

Other communications support

Seven 'Chatty Beetle' units¹ sent by USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) arrived in Tonga on 16 February and are undergoing the mandatory 72-hour quarantine period. When released, the Chatty Beetle's will assist the Tonga Meteorological Service to re-establish the early warning system with the outer islands.

Through the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC) tsunami unit, UNESCO in the Pacific has shipped two additional satellite phones including SIM cards and external antennae to Tonga from Paris, France. This was a request for assistance received from the Tonga Meteorological Services. The

¹ Chatty Beetle is a portable Iridium satellite terminal that permits text-based alerts and messaging in remote locations, where communication options are limited.

satellite phones are currently in customs clearance in Auckland, New Zealand, and are scheduled to arrive in Tonga on 21 February.

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) in Nuku'alofa continues to offer access to internet capacity for humanitarians on the ground, via its back-up VSAT satellite connectivity services. Those interested can contact Pacific.ETC@wfp.org to link up with ADB.

Information

The ETC Dashboard on the response in Tonga can be seen [here](#).

Mapping

Through its [Disaster Connectivity Map \(DCM\)](#), ITU continues to map the status of connectivity in Tonga. Detected data points on the main island of Tongatapu show an increase in mobile internet usage from less than one percent to up to 10 percent, as compared against the baseline. However, there are still limited or no data points detected on the remote outer islands. This correlates with the current status of national service providers in Tonga, which have partially restored services on Tongatapu only. The outer islands remain largely disconnected.

Note: No data points are tracked from connectivity provided via VSAT, as this connectivity is not related to the network of any national service provider. Therefore, connectivity provided by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) or USP in Nuku'alofa, for example, will not show on the 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 eruption of the Hunga-Tonga-Hunga-Ha'apai volcano and subsequent tsunamis.

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.

The COVID-19 lockdown enforced in Tonga on 3 February has impacted on the availability of focal points in the response.

Meetings

A Global ETC Joint teleconference will take place on **Wednesday 23 February 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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