

Ruapehu Update 004

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NZ BRACED FOR MAJOR BLAST

Wellington - Reuter

SCIENTISTS said yesterday a dangerous volcanic eruption was occurring at Mount Ruapehu in New Zealand as civil aviation authorities banned flights over the central North Island.

"The kettle is boiling vigorously," said Department of Conservation scientist Harry Keys. "The more magma (molten rock) that approaches the surface, the bigger the eruption and the more voluminous the amount of material thrown out."

A resident of Ohakune township, at the foot of Mount Ruapehu, told Radio New Zealand the volcano was erupting violently and continuously. "The cloud is just billowing continuously ... just now it's going wild. The whole rim is just exploding," he said. The Civil Aviation Authority had closed the airspace up to 7600 metres (25,000 ft).

Civil defence authorities raised the alert level around Ruapehu to four on their five point scale but a government spokesman said there were no immediate plans to evacuate the sparsely-populated region.

He said a "general alert" was being issued, advising people to disconnect water tanks to avoid contamination from ash and urging motorists to drive with care on the main highway, known as the "Desert Road".

"This is basically to get people to be on their toes, particularly people living within a 100km radius of the mountain, and to keep tuned in to the radio for local civil defence instructions," he said.

The Institute of Geological and Nuclear Sciences said in a statement a continuous plume of smoke and ash was rising from many explosions.

"The eruption is considered hazardous because there is clearly extreme risk to people on the upper slopes and in river channels which have ... or may be affected by lahars (mudflows). The ash plume east of the volcano presents a significant hazard to aviation," it said.

Keys said scientists were expecting a major eruption, probably within 12 hours. "the evidence is that we haven't seen the biggest yet," he said.

Local ski fields were closed at the weekend after earlier eruptions. Willy Sage, a pilot taking tourists for flights over the crater before the air restrictions were imposed, said rocks were being hurled up to 150 metres into the sky by eruptions every five minutes.

'They are pretty big, some are as big as cars,' he said.

Chris Griffin, general manager of the Grand Chateau hotel at the base of Ruapehu, said the mountain was "steaming away quite nicely" but there were no plans to evacuate 110 guests and 80 staff. He was checking the situation every half hour with emergency authorities.

Scott Lee, marketing manager for the nearby Whakapapa ski area, said about

100 people were being evacuated from 52 ski huts on the field and only a skeleton staff would remain.

In 1953, an eruption at Ruapehu wrecked a railway bridge just before the arrival of a Wellington-Auckland express train, which plunged into a river with the loss of more than 150 lives.