

Ruapehu Update 007

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SCIENTIST DISMISSES N-TEST, VOLCANO LINK

By New Zealand correspondent PATTRICK SMELLIE

Links between French nuclear testing and New Zealand's recent volcanic eruptions were dismissed as "crap" yesterday by one of the volcanologists heading research into the eruptions on Mt Ruapehu, Dr Colin Wilson.

"I just had to do a crap thing for the BBC World Service on this. I thought they were above this sort of thing," Dr Wilson told The Australian after a day in which the volcano returned to life, throwing more mud, rocks and ash into the surrounding atmosphere.

The European Parliament said on Tuesday night it would examine potential links between the French tests and the New Zealand volcanic eruptions.

"Volcanoes were erupting long before nuclear testing and they will be erupting long after nuclear testing. There is no connection," said Dr Wilson. "It's simply ludicrous. If piddling around with nuclear devices, however many thousands of kilometres away, can have this effect, then why isn't Ruapehu affecting Naruhoe (a dormant volcano which occasionally erupts and is next door to Ruapehu)."

A British Labour Party MP of the European Parliament, Mr Kenneth Collins, yesterday said that while the eruptions "may just be coincidence, we need to investigate".

Yesterday's eruptions were similar in size to those seen since last weekend and were consistent with volcanologists' expectations that the volcano could remain sporadically active for a considerable time. A stage-four alert on a scale of five remained in place.

Ashfalls continued to be fairly light and although there were more mudflows from the volcano, the water in the crater lake which feeds such flows was starting to run dry. Huge international media interest in the eruptions revived when better weather allowed a clear view of the mountain.

Although small by world standards, the eruptions were "the best pics of a volcano erupting seen anywhere for years", said a correspondent for a British television network. There had been no footage of the moment of eruption in other, more destructive recent volcano blasts overseas, whereas the continuous nature of the Ruapehu eruptions and the dramatic images created by the ash and mud above and on the snow-covered mountain were creating images which were compelling and easy to gather.

While sightseers are flocking to Ruapehu, tourism operators in the area are becoming concerned that the coverage is giving potential foreign visitors a false impression that New Zealand has become dangerous to visit.