

Mission Report

UNDAC Mission for eruption of Volcano Nyragongo, Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, 18-28 January 2002

Background

On 17 January 2002, volcano Nyragongo entered in an eruption resulting in two large lava flows which, in the turn of a few hours, destroyed little less than 20% of the town of Goma. The eruption triggered the sudden displacement of nearly 400,000 of the 500,000 estimated inhabitants of the town of Goma. An estimated 150,000 people fled to the West of the town, towards the area of Sake, and another 250,000 crossed the border with Rwanda, spreading into the town of Gisenyi. As the number of deaths directly related to the volcano eruption was low, major humanitarian concerns remained for the large displaced population in consideration of the continuing seismic activity and of a possible new eruption.

Terms of Reference and Deployment

The deployment of an UNDAC mission was requested by the Resident/Humanitarian Coordinator in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) on the evening of 17 January. A team was assembled overnight and deployment was organised for the afternoon of 18 January. The Terms of Reference for the mission included support to assessment and coordination activities carried out by the many humanitarian organisations already present on the ground and support to the activities of a group of four volcanologists contracted by the United Nations to study the situation and its likely developments. The Team Leader left from Geneva on the afternoon of January 18 and met with two other members in Amsterdam. The two other members joined the group in Nairobi on the morning of January 19.

Mission

The mission arrived in the Rwandan capital Kigali at around noon on January 19. The group was met at the airport and transported to town where they briefly met with the Resident Coordinator. Explanations were to be provided as to what the mission was there for, since the deployment had been asked by the HC in DRC, whilst, for practical reasons, the mission had actually been deployed to Rwanda. At around 2:00 pm the group, together with a Humanitarian Affairs Officer from OCHA Kinshasa, left for the affected area. During the trip, the UNDAC team agreed on a basic division of responsibilities: two members would wait for the arrival of the volcanologists and then work with them, and the two others would work at setting up minimum facilities in support to coordination efforts (“mini-OSOCC”).

The team arrived in a refugees-flooded Gisenyi by mid-afternoon and reached the UN Office, where some coordination structures were being put in place. By late afternoon, as the bus which had transported them from Kigali left, they found themselves without transport, accommodation and local communication means. Mercifully, one

of the team members could arrange for temporary accommodation at the Heineken brewery in Gisenyi through the Dutch Embassy in Kigali. The director of the brewery very kindly put at the disposal of the team a 4x4 vehicle, which proved essential in the following days in limiting the damages deriving from not having means of transportation. After having met with all major partners (UN agencies and NGOs from both Gisenyi and Goma), the Team Leader met with the Rwandan government (Deputy Minister MINALOC and Prefet of Gisenyi) in the evening.

The day of 20 January saw the beginning of the counter-exodus of the refugees from Gisenyi to Goma. Few refugees had made it to the camps designated by the Rwandan authorities to host them, and humanitarian agencies were undecided as to how to best provide assistance to the thousands still scattered in town. On the coordination side, UNICEF, supported by OCHA, was taking care (from Gisenyi) of the Goma side, while the UNDAC Team Leader took over temporarily from WFP the coordination on the Rwandan side. In the early afternoon, Mr. Ross Mountain arrived in Gisenyi and picked up the Team Leader for a helicopter overfly of Goma. Later in the day, they both flew back to Kigali to meet with the government and humanitarian agencies there. The fact that the Team Leader was called back to the capital without possibility of properly informing the rest of the team and that the team was left – still – without proper means of communications and transport impacted negatively on the morale of the other UNDAC team members. Also, at that stage, the two team members who were tasked with setting up databases of contacts, organisations and relief supplies available felt frustrated as the agencies were already rushing back to Goma and were not available for proper interviews.

By January 21, a large part of the refugees had gone back to Goma. The first of the international volcanologists arrived and, accompanied by two of the UNDAC team members, went on a preliminary survey with the local counterparts. The Team Leader continued his support role to coordination in Gisenyi (the idea of having a backstopping/supporting base there to back-up the operations which were fast moving to Goma still seemed good). By the evening, a press conference was organised for Mr. Mountain and the volcanologists, in which it was announced that there were no signs of an imminent new eruption. A meeting was also convened between Mr. Mountain and the UNDACT Team, in which it was decided that two members would travel to Kigali the following day and provide support to the coordination efforts there.

On January 22 it became clear that the focus of humanitarian operations had shifted to Goma. Only some 10,000 refugees were left in the two camps on the Rwandan side, and the Prefet of Gisenyi provided excellent coordination among the agencies active there. The three remaining members of the UNDAC Team moved to Goma, where a comprehensive coordination structure was being set-up under the leadership of UNICEF and with the support of OCHA. From that point, and until the end of the mission, the Team devoted itself entirely to supporting the work of the team of national and international volcanologists (by that time, two other experts had arrived for Italy, and a fourth one would arrive a day later).

The support functions involved logistical support and interface with the humanitarian agencies, the two governments and the press. The Team Leader continued attending the government-run coordination meetings in Gisenyi, to provide information about the humanitarian situation in Goma and, especially, updates on the volcano.

It must be said that the initial optimism concerning a possible re-start of the eruptive activity of the volcano had given way to new worries, as an important seismic activity continued throughout the week and the scientists lacked completely a model to interpret it. Daily helicopter surveys were organised with the help of MONUC, and, later, a private helicopter was hired to transport the scientists on the top of the volcano. The UNDAC Team was also instrumental in organising and supporting a series of field missions to inspect the system of new fractures which were being created by the earthquakes, and a few reconnaissance missions on the lake, including through deep-lake diving. Daily reports were compiled on the volcano activity and a color-coded alert system was put in place.

The two UNDAC members who had left for Kigali worked for two days alongside WFP in setting up a tracking system for all incoming supplies. Their contribution was highly appreciated by the Resident Coordinator and other partners.

Two of the remaining UNDAC members in Goma left on Thursday 24, and the Team Leader remained until Sunday 27. On top of the continuing support to the activity of the experts, he contributed to the organisation of the international support to the Goma Volcano Observatory. On the last day of the mission, the Team Leader participated in a joint survey with the scientists, the local administrators and a broad representation of humanitarian agencies to inspect the sites chosen for both temporary and definitive relocation of the inhabitants of Goma.

Lessons Learnt

1) The Team was deployed for a natural disaster occurring in a complex emergency context. The fact that the contribution by the Team to the coordination efforts was little more than marginal was due to several factors:

- the long-term presence of a large number of humanitarian actors in the area, and the existence of established coordination mechanisms;
- the rapidity with which the crisis evolved, with the focus of humanitarian action (and coordination) swiftly moving from Gisenyi to Goma;
- the dramatic constraints deriving from the lack of transportation and local communication means for the Team.
- The constraints deriving from the limited command of French language by three of the five members of the Team.

2) The lack of transportation and local communications means, particularly serious during the first four days, was also due to several factors:

- the Team did not make its basic needs clear enough with UNDP Kigali, also on account of the fact that the mission had not been asked for by the RC Rwanda;

- the members of the Team did not act upon the recommendation of the Team Leader to purchase cellular telephones (easily available in Gisenyi) and to hire transport locally;

3) The team was possibly too large. It was definitely a good idea, once the situation on the ground became clearer, to move two UNDAC team members back to Kigali. During the “support to the scientists” phase, two members would have probably been enough, also on account of the fact that one of the three who remained in Goma did not speak French.

4) The Support Module sent by SRSA proved to be an extremely valuable asset, both for the UNDAC Team and for the humanitarian community at large.

5) The role of the UNDAC Team in support to the volcanologists has been fundamental and highly appreciated. Acting as the interface between scientists on one side and the UN, the humanitarian community, the government(s) and the media on the other is a function that UNDAC is perfectly equipped to carry out and represents a “perfect niche” for the System.

6) This particular emergency exposed the fact that the UN System is not equipped with a capacity for monitoring volcano-related emergencies and for managing disaster reduction, preparedness and response specifically related to volcanological risks.