

Fresh quakes hit Hawaii after Kilauea volcano erupts, hundreds flee

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The US Geological Survey (USGS) said the strongest tremor at 12:32 p.m. (2332 GMT) measured 6.9, a magnitude capable of causing severe damage.

County workers deliver cots and blankets to an evacuation center in Pahoa available to residents of the Puna communities of Leilani Estates and Lanipuna Gardens who were forced to leave their homes after the Kilauea Volcano erupted on Thursday. (Reuters)

Hawaii: A series of fresh earthquakes on Friday, including a powerful magnitude 6.9, hit Hawaii's Big Island, where the Kilauea volcano has been spewing fountains of lava into residential areas and forcing hundreds to evacuate.

The US Geological Survey (USGS) said the strongest tremor at 12:32 p.m. (2332 GMT) measured 6.9, a magnitude capable of causing severe damage.

The Pacific Tsunami Warning Center said the quake, whose epicentre was on the south flank of the volcano, was not large enough to cause a tsunami although it generated sea level changes around the island of up to 15.7 inches (40 cm).

It caused buildings to shake at the Community Center in Pahoa town, one of two evacuation centers in the area hastily set up after lava started bubbling up through fissures in the ground in neighborhoods nearby.

A new fissure opened up just before the latest tremor on Friday in one of those neighborhoods, Leilani Estates, about a dozen miles (19 km) from the volcano, the Hawaii County Civil Defense Agency said in a text message, making a total of four found so far.

Kilauea, one of the world's most active volcanoes and one of five on the island, has been in constant eruption for 35 years. Lava flows from the volcano have covered 48 square miles (125 square km), according to the US Geological Survey. Scientists say it is nearly impossible to predict how long an eruption will last.

On Thursday, Kilauea began spewing lava into residential areas after a series of earthquakes over the past week, the USGS reported on its website. Starting around 11 a.m. on Friday, the island experienced a flurry of earthquakes, culminating in the massive magnitude 6.9 tremor. Residents in Leilani Estates and Lanipuna Gardens subdivisions, home to about 1,700 people, were ordered to evacuate in the early hours of Friday after public works officials reported steam and lava erupting from fissures in the road, the Civil Defense agency said.

No injuries or deaths were reported, but Hawaii Governor David Ige activated the Hawaii National Guard to provide emergency help.

PART OF LIFE

Keone Kalawe, 58, a native Hawaiian who was volunteering at an evacuation center in Pahoa, shrugged off the latest quake as "just part of life over here." His family was forced out of the village of Kapoho, about 6 miles (9.7 km) from Pahoa, after an eruption in 1960, and he's witnessed other eruptions over the past three decades. So he has lived with lava, which is not dangerous, he says. "I tell people, 'You just have to sidestep.'"

A fissure on Leilani and Kaupili Streets in the Leilani Estates subdivision caused by an eruption of the Kilauea Volcano is shown following a series of earthquakes, in Hawaii on Friday. (Reuters)

A 492-foot-long (150-meter) fissure ripped open a road and spewed lava for about two hours in Leilani Estates at about 5:30 p.m., the Hawaii Volcano Observatory said on its website.

Dale Miller, 58, a resident of Leilani Estates, said police knocked on his door at 4 a.m. and ordered an evacuation.

“There are lava tubes on our property,” he said referring to the natural tunnels underground that drain lava during an eruption. “The whole thing is Swiss cheese.

“It felt like there was something under the house -” like a big snake was moving under the house,” said Lee Begaye, 61, Miller’s partner and housemate. Lee added this was the first time in eight years of living by the volcano that they’d had to evacuate.

HIGH SULPHUR LEVELS

Civil defense officials have warned the public about high levels of sulfur dioxide near the volcano, one reason for the evacuation orders. The gas can cause skin irritations and breathing difficulties.

Keala Noel, 64, also from Leilani Estates, said she didn’t feel the lava was directly threatening them, but came to the shelter at 3 a.m. on Friday because of the sulphur. “We stayed because we didn’t feel any imminent danger. But I could hardly breathe yesterday.”

One resident, Ikaika Marzo, told Hawaii News Now he saw “fountains” of lava as high as 125 feet (38 meters).

Lava, which can reach temperatures of about 2,100 degrees Fahrenheit (1,150 Celsius), spread less than about 10 meters (33 feet) from the fissure, the observatory said.

Betty Long, 72, another Leilani Estates resident, evacuated to the shelter near Pahoa in the early hours of Friday morning, but her husband stayed behind with their pets because he was afraid of looters.

“I think my husband is like a lot of residents there” who are assuming looting is going to be a problem. “That’s why they are reluctant to leave,” she said.

Long said that while their retirement home is a gorgeous place to live, it comes with risks. She and her husband faced a choice between purchasing hurricane or volcano insurance. They chose the hurricane insurance, she said.

- Reuters