

New Zealand divers attempt to recover last 2 volcano victims

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Police believe one of the missing bodies was sighted in the water close to the island by rescue teams on Tuesday, the day after the eruption.

A team of eight New Zealand military specialists landed on White Island early Friday to retrieve the bodies of victims after the Dec. 9 eruption. (New Zealand Defence Force via AP)

Whakatane: Police divers returned to the waters around New Zealand's volcanic White Island at dawn Saturday to search for the remaining two victims of an eruption that left at least 16 dead and dozens severely burned. Military specialists on Friday recovered six bodies from the island in a carefully planned but risky operation. Two more bodies of victims known to have been on the island could not be located during the four-hour operation, carried out by bomb disposal experts " six men and two women " wearing yellow hazmat suits and breathing apparatuses.

Police believe one of the missing bodies was sighted in the water close to the island by rescue teams on Tuesday, the day after the eruption. The location of the other body is not known. Divers began the search for the bodies on Friday but were forced to stop near evening when weather conditions deteriorated. An aerial search of the island was suspended at nightfall.

Police divers prepare to search the waters near White Island off the coast of Whakatane, New Zealand, Saturday Dec.14, 2019. (New Zealand Police via AP)

Meanwhile, the six bodies were transported to Auckland for identification.

In a statement, police said their own experts, forensic pathologists, scientists, odontologists and coroner's officials were involved in the work of identification. Under New Zealand law, the coroner must confirm the victims' identities. Police said the process may take some time, though they are working as quickly as possible to return the bodies to their families.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern called on New Zealanders to observe a minute's silence in memory of victims of the disaster at 2:11 p.m. on Monday, exactly a week from the eruption. Ardern and her Cabinet will pause in silence during their regular meeting at Parliament in Wellington.

"Wherever you are in New Zealand or around the world, this is a moment we can stand alongside those who have lost loved ones in this extraordinary tragedy," Ardern said.

Unstable conditions continued to hamper rescue workers from searching for people missing and feared dead after the volcano off the New Zealand coast erupted in a towering blast of ash and scalding steam while dozens of tourists explored its moon-like surface. (Michael Schade via AP, File)

“Together we can express our sorrow for those who have died and been hurt and our support for their grieving families and friends.” The bodies recovered Friday are thought to be of Australians, who were most of the visitors to the island when the volcano erupted. The two last victims are believed to be New Zealanders — a tour guide and a boat captain who had taken tourists to the island.

Scientists have warned that White Island, which is the exposed tip of a mostly undersea volcano, is highly volatile, and has been venting steam and mud regularly.

The eruption Monday occurred as 47 tourists and their guides were exploring the island. Of the 15 injured, 11 were in “every critical” condition. All 13 Australians who suffered burns have been returned to Australia, he said.

Specialist medical teams were heading to New Zealand from Australia, Britain and the United States. Skin banks were also sending the tissue to New Zealand hospitals to use for grafts.

Authorities say 24 Australians, nine Americans, five New Zealanders, four Germans, two Britons, two Chinese and a Malaysian were on the island at the time. Many were from a Royal Caribbean cruise ship that had left Sydney two days earlier.

- AP