

Thousands flee volcano in Philippines

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Thousands of villagers have been evacuated after authorities raised the alert level on the Philippines' most active volcano, which has started to spew lava as well as ash.

State vulcanologists raised the level of alert on the cone-shaped, 2,460 metre Mayon volcano on Tuesday night to two steps below eruption.

The decision was prompted by ash explosions and dark orange lava fragments which, glowing in the dark, trickled down the mountain slope.

Nearly 50,000 people live in an eight kilometre radius around the mountain, and authorities have begun moving thousands of them in case it erupts, Albay provincial Governor Joey Salceda said on Tuesday.

The first of 20 vehicles, including army trucks, have been sent to villages to take residents to schools and other temporary housing, provincial emergency management official Jukes Nunez said.

"It's 10 days before Christmas. Most likely people will be in evacuation centres, and if Mayon's activity won't ease down we will not allow them to return to their homes," Nunez said.

"It's difficult and sad, especially for children."

Magma has been rising at the volcano over the past two weeks and began to ooze out of its crater on Monday night.

But it could get worse in coming days, said Renato Solidum, head of the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology.

"Now lava is trickling down, but if the ascent of magma is sustained there will be laval flows," Solidum told AP.

"There is also the possibility of an explosion."

Residents in the central province of Albay are used to moving away from Mayon, which spewed ash last month and prompted the evacuation of some villages.

About 30,000 people were moved when it last erupted in 2006. Typhoon-triggered mudslides near the mountain later that year buried entire villages, killing more than 1,000 people.

Mayon's most violent eruption, in 1814, killed more than 1,200 people and buried a town in mud. A 1993 eruption killed 79 people.

The Philippines lies along the Pacific "Ring of Fire," where volcanic activity and earthquakes are common. About 22 out of 37 volcanoes in the archipelago are active.