

Volcano forces more Filipinos from homes

By Bullit Marquez, AAP December 18, 2009, 2:32 pm



Volcano ready to erupt

Security forces in army trucks have sent about 3,000 residents outside the danger zone surrounding the smoldering Mayon volcano in the Philippines, which looks set for a major eruption after days of shooting ash plumes and spilling lava.

Authorities in central Albay province declared a round-the-clock ban on anyone being within the 8km zone

around the 2,460 metre mountain, the most active of the country's 22 volcanoes.

More than 35,000 evacuees were given sleeping mats and food as they settled down in evacuation centres, mostly schools, where social workers were organising Christmas parties and games to keep children busy, said provincial emergency management official Jukes Nunez.

Mayon shot two plumes of smoke early on Friday, one reaching almost two kilometres into the clear blue sky.

Lava continued to trickle down its steep slope, and two lava domes had formed from rising magma inside the crater, said chief state vulcanologist Renato Solidum.

He said the domes could grow bigger and plug the crater, leading to a gas explosion.

Scientists have raised a five-stage alert to two steps below a hazardous eruption, which they said is possible within weeks.

Solidum said cascading lava could trigger a pyroclastic flow - superheated gas and volcanic debris racing down the slopes at very high speed, vaporising everything in its path.

Albay Governor Joey Salceda said a provincial board had authorised police and soldiers to move out some 2,000 remaining families - or 10,000 people - from around two towns in Mayon's foothills.

Many had refused to leave their coconut and vegetable farms during the harvest time. Police will show them pictures of victims of a 1993 eruption that killed more than 70 people to persuade them to evacuate the area, he said.

Nunez said people were co-operating.

"They know the danger. We have to enforce our objective of zero casualty," he said.

At the Bagumbayan Central School in Legazpi, the provincial capital, Guilly Anonuevo, a 75-year-old veteran of five evacuations, will spend Christmas for the first time in a shelter.

"We do not know where we will get our Christmas dinner. We have no money," she said.