

Hawaii's Kilauea volcano jolts with lava, quakes and gas

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Sputtering lava, strong earthquakes and toxic gas jolted the southern part of the Big Island of Hawaii as magma shifted underneath a restless Kilauea volcano.

The trifecta of natural threats forced stressed out residents to evacuate and prompted the closure of parks and college campuses yesterday.

Multiple new vents, from which lava is spurting out of the ground, formed in the same residential neighborhood where molten rock first emerged Thursday.

At midday, a magnitude 6.9 earthquake struck "the biggest of hundreds of quakes this week and the largest to strike the state in 43 years. Residents were also warned to watch out for dangerous levels of sulfuric gas.

Hawaiian Volcano Observatory spokeswoman Janet Babb said the earthquakes reflected the volcano adjusting to the shifting magma.

"The magma moving down the rift zones, it causes stress on the south flank of the volcano," Babb said. "We're just getting a series of earthquakes." She said scientists were studying whether the quakes would affect the eruption.

The lava lake at Kilauea's summit crater dropped significantly, suggesting the magma was moving eastward toward Puna, a mostly rural district of forests, papaya farms and lava fields left by past eruptions.

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Julie Woolsey evacuated her home late Thursday as a volcanic vent, or an opening in the Earth's surface where lava emerges, sprouted up on her street in the Leilani Estates neighborhood.

Lava was about 1,000 yards from her home, which Woolsey built on a lot purchased for \$35,000 11 years ago after living on Maui became too expensive.

"We knew we were building on an active volcano," she said, but added that she thought the danger from lava was a remote possibility.

She said she thought it was remote even days ago when she began packing and preparing to evacuate.

“You can’t really predict what Pele is going to do,” Woolsey said, referring to the Hawaiian volcano goddess. “It’s hard to keep up. We’re hoping our house doesn’t burn down.” She let her chickens loose, loaded her dogs into her truck and evacuated with her daughter and grandson. She’s staying at a cabin with her daughter’s in-laws.

Local authorities held a community meeting with residents from lava affected areas Friday night at Pahoa High School.

Two new volcanic vents, from which lava is spurting, developed Friday, bringing the number formed to five.

State Sen Russell Ruderman said he’s experienced many earthquakes, but the magnitude-5.4 temblor that hit first “scared the heck out of me.” Merchandise fell off the shelves in a natural food store he owns.

When the larger quake followed, he said he felt strong shaking in Hilo, the island’s largest city that is roughly 45 minutes from the rural Puna area.

“We’re all rattled right now,” he said. “It’s one thing after another. It’s feeling kind of stressful out here.” State officials didn’t report damage to roadways. Hawaii County Acting Mayor Wil Okabe said the larger quake cracked a beam in a county gymnasium in Hilo, forcing workers to be sent home.

Hawaii Electric Light said the jolt knocked out power to about 14,400 customers, but electricity was restored about two hours later.

Hawaii Volcanoes National Park evacuated all visitors and non-emergency staff. The quakes triggered rock slides on park trails and crater walls. Narrow fissures appeared on the ground at a building overlooking the crater at Kilauea’s summit.

The University of Hawaii at Hilo and Hawaii Community College both closed campuses to allow students and employees to “attend to personal business and priorities.”

Authorities already had closed a long stretch of Highway 130, one of the main arteries through Puna, because of the threat of sulfuric gas.

At Leilani Estates, where lava was pushing through cracks in the earth, some residents still wanted to get home.

Brad Stanfill said the lava was more than 3 miles (5 kilometers) from his house but he was not allowed in because of a mandatory evacuation order. He was frustrated because he wanted to feed his rabbits and dogs and check on his property.

One woman angrily told police guarding Leilani Estates that she was going in and they couldn’t arrest her. She stormed past police unopposed.

Leilani Estates has about 1,700 residents and 770 homes. A nearby neighborhood, Lanipuna Gardens, which has a few dozen people, also has been evacuated.

Kilauea has been continuously erupting since 1983 and is one of five volcanoes that make up the Big Island. Activity picked up earlier this week, indicating a possible new lava outbreak.

- AP