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Cruise Ships Arriving Friday to Evacuate St. Vincent Residents as La Soufriere Volcano Threatens Explosion

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April 1, 2021 pic of the La Soufriere shows the volcano's dome growing as magma fills the space around the 1979 dome. By. SOUFRIERE MONITORING UNIT (SMU)/VIA CARIBBEAN LIFE

KINGSTOWN, St. Vincent, CMC – Prime Minister Dr. Ralph Gonsalves issued an immediate evacuation order as the situation at the La Soufriere volcano deteriorated further on Thursday afternoon, and announced that several cruise ships would be arriving from Friday to help get residents out.

He made the announcement on the advice of the country's disaster officials, after Professor Richard Robertson, the lead scientist monitoring the volcano, reported further activity at La Soufriere.

"I hereby order as follows: 1) the evacuation of all premises in the areas designated as the red zone on the northeast and northwest of St. Vincent and the evacuation of the area itself...and 2) the exclusion of persons, vessels or vehicles from such premises and areas, save and except for the purpose of effecting the said evacuation," he said, adding that while the evacuation order would be published on Friday, it would take immediate effect.

"I want to urge all our people to be calm, do not panic, be disciplined, be orderly."

The National Emergency Management Organisation (NEMO) said the safe areas were those from North Union to Kingstown, on the Windward side of the island, Barouallie to Kingstown on the Leeward side and the Grenadine Islands.

The prime minister said Royal Caribbean was offering three of its ships, two of them expected to arrive by Friday morning, while Carnival Cruise Line has also indicated that by Friday evening, two of its cruise ships will be in the country to transport evacuees.

"The cruise ships of Royal Caribbean will be first used to transport the persons from St. Vincent and the Grenadines who are to be evacuated to other countries in the region who have offered temporary hospitality, namely St Lucia, Grenada, Barbados and Antigua," he explained, adding that the British Virgin Islands has also offered assistance but arrangements have not been made.

Gonsalves indicated that other Caribbean countries, including Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana and St. Kitts and Nevis have also offered support.

During a briefing earlier on Thursday, Professor Robertson indicated that heightened activity at La Soufriere suggested that fresh magma was trying to get to the surface, and an explosion could occur within hours or days. He had therefore advised that given current data, and the uncertainty about when an explosion would occur, preparations be finalized for a possible evacuation within a few hours' notice.

At a press briefing this afternoon, Professor Robertson said the situation at the volcano had deteriorated further.

"At this point, we cannot say for sure, and cannot give any further clear warning, that nothing would happen within the next 24 to 48 hours," he said. "There is no further warning we expect and, therefore, to guarantee the safety of people...it's best to take certain decisions."

"So, right now we would not be surprised, for example, if sometime between the next 24 to 48 hours there are explosions from the volcano that are much more significant than we have seen so far... We seem to be clearly heading to something that might be explosive and therefore we need to take necessary actions to safeguard life and limb."

The country is currently on red alert – the highest threat level as it braces for heightened activity – with all emergency shelters activated.

Prime Minister Gonsalves, who disclosed that he was attending a meeting of the National Emergency Management Council when Professor Robertson alerted him to the latest development, said NEMO director Michelle Forbes had advised him on the evacuation.

