Imminent DREF Operation

Vanuatu Volcanic Eruption 2026

Survey flight view of eruption and ash cloud, 7 Mar 2026. Photo: Unity Airlines

Appeal: **MDRVU013**	DREF Allocated: **CHF 80,000**	Hazard: **Volcanic Eruption**	Country: **Vanuatu**
Population at risk (if available): **4,684**	Operation Start Date: **20-03-2026**	Operation End Date: **31-05-2026**	
Event Onset: **Sudden**	Forecasted day of event (or peak): **2026-04-17**	Operation Timeframe: **45 days**	

Targeted Regions: **Penama**

Scenario analysis

When and where is the hazard expected to happen?

Ambae Island remains an active volcanic environment due to ongoing activity at Manaro Voui. Increased volcanic activity was observed in early 2026, with reports of gas emissions, ashfall, and environmental impacts affecting surrounding communities.

On 19 February 2026, the Vanuatu Meteorology and Geo-Hazards Department (VMGD) reported increased volcanic activity, including gas emissions and dark plumes from the vent. On 23 February 2026, the volcanic alert level was raised to Level 3 (Minor Eruption), indicating increased activity but with impacts largely localised.

At present, the volcanic activity remains confined within Lake Voui at the summit crater. The officially designated volcanic hazard area corresponds to Danger Zone B, which covers approximately a 3 km radius around the active vent. This zone is considered hazardous due to the risk of volcanic projectiles, ashfall, gas emissions, and other volcanic hazards that may occur at any time.

While the immediate danger zone is limited to the summit area, ashfall has already been reported in several communities on Ambae. Ground observations between 22 and 23 February 2026 confirmed that communities in the southern and south-eastern parts of Ambae, particularly those located downwind of the volcano, are experiencing volcanic ashfall. Ashfall may continue depending on wind direction and plume height, potentially affecting additional areas of the island as well as nearby islands exposed to prevailing trade winds.

Volcanic ash and gas emissions are already affecting surrounding communities. Ashfall has been reported in several parts of Ambae, particularly in the southern and south-eastern areas located downwind of the volcano. The ashfall has begun to contaminate rainwater harvesting systems and surface water sources, which are the primary sources of drinking water for many households. Communities have also reported health concerns associated with ash exposure, including respiratory irritation, coughing, red eyes, and skin irritation. In addition, ash accumulation on roofs and agricultural land is beginning to affect household living conditions and local food production, raising concerns about the continued safety of shelters and potential impacts on livelihoods.

VMGD monitoring indicates that volcanic activity may continue in the coming weeks. Should volcanic activity intensify further, an escalation of the alert level could lead to heavier ashfall, increased gas emissions, and wider environmental impacts affecting additional communities across Ambae Island. Streams and watercourses may also pose a risk during periods of heavy rainfall due to ash deposits, which may lead to abnormal water flow or contamination.

Given the uncertainty surrounding the evolution of the volcanic activity and the potential for rapid escalation, preparedness measures are required to reduce humanitarian risks and support communities that may be affected by ashfall, water contamination, and related health impacts.

Explain the underlying vulnerabilities and risks the hazard poses for at-risk communities?

The previous significant increase in volcanic activity on Ambae occurred during 2017–2018, during which the VRCS supported affected populations through a DREF operation. Assistance included the distribution of key non-food items (NFIs), dissemination of essential information, and the provision of psychosocial support and first aid, an approach similar to that proposed for the current situation. In 2018, the DREF was launched at Alert Level 3, at a stage when ashfall had already impacted communities for several months and government-led evacuations were underway. Drawing on these lessons, the current Imminent DREF aims to enable earlier preparedness and response actions, allowing VRCS to anticipate needs, reduce potential impacts, and respond more effectively should the situation escalate as experienced in 2018.

The ongoing volcanic activity has resulted in increased ash emissions, gas release, and continuous seismic movement, raising concerns about further eruptions and prolonged disruption to nearby communities. Populations in South and West Ambae are particularly exposed, with many households located in close proximity to the volcano and heavily reliant on natural resources for their daily survival.

An estimated 4,684 people are at risk of being affected by the volcanic activity, representing the total population in the most affected areas of South Ambae and West Ambae. VRCS will target 166 households (approximately 830 people) through this operation. The prioritization is based on available resources, operational capacity, and the need to focus on the most vulnerable and at-risk communities located within the identified hazard zones.

Ashfall has already affected rainwater harvesting systems, the primary source of drinking water for most households, increasing the risk of contamination and limiting access to safe water. At the same time, subsistence gardens and small-scale agriculture, which form the backbone of household food security and income, are being impacted by ash deposition. This creates heightened risks to both food availability and livelihoods. The geographic isolation of some communities, coupled with limited access to alternative income sources, further reduces coping capacity and increases vulnerability.

Health risks are also significant. Exposure to volcanic ash and sulphur dioxide gases can lead to respiratory problems, eye irritation, skin conditions, and other related illnesses. These risks are particularly pronounced among children, older persons, and individuals with pre-existing health conditions. Limited access to health services in some affected areas further exacerbates these vulnerabilities, especially if the situation persists or intensifies.

In addition to physical risks, the ongoing volcanic activity including loud noises, ground tremors, and uncertainty around potential escalation that has contributed to increased levels of fear, anxiety, sleep disruption, and psychological stress within communities. Reduced visibility, contamination of crops and water sources, and the possibility of further eruptions also raise concerns about displacement and the emergence of additional humanitarian needs.

Overall, these factors compound existing vulnerabilities, leaving affected communities highly exposed to both current and potential impacts of the volcanic hazard, while their limited coping mechanisms constrain their ability to effectively respond and recover.

Source Name	Source Link
1. Penama Provincial Updates	https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1BSUHkLwVL/
2. Unity Airlines Vanuatu	https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1G5QmSpro8/
3. Vanuatu Meteorology and Geo-hazards Department	https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1GpD5wnjDS/

Supporting Documentation

Plan

Which of the expected severe humanitarian impacts of the hazard are your actions addressing? Why were these impacts chosen?

The selected sectors are WASH, Health, and Shelter reflecting the most immediate and likely humanitarian impacts of ashfall and potential eruption, ensuring that early actions and response interventions are both targeted and effective.

1. WASH

Volcanic activity on Ambae has the potential to significantly affect access to safe drinking water. Ashfall combined with rainfall can contaminate rainwater harvesting systems, open water sources, and household storage containers, which are the main sources of drinking water for many communities. Contaminated water increases the risk of waterborne diseases and can severely affect household health and hygiene conditions. For this reason, WASH has been prioritised as one of the key sectors in the preparedness actions.

Under early actions, the VRCS will focus on preparedness measures aimed at reducing the risk of water contamination and strengthening community awareness. These activities include the provision of bottled water to ensure that safe drinking water is available for vulnerable households should water sources become contaminated. In addition, volunteers will be trained on safe water awareness to support community education on protecting water sources, safe storage of drinking water, and basic household water treatment practices. These early mitigation measures aim to reduce the immediate health risks associated with unsafe water and improve community preparedness ahead of a potential eruption.

Under early response, if volcanic activity escalates into an eruption, VRCS will mobilise trained volunteers and pre-positioned supplies to support affected communities. This will include facilitating access to safe drinking water and reinforcing safe water practices to prevent waterborne disease outbreaks during the emergency phase.

2. Health

Volcanic eruptions often generate ashfall that can pose serious health risks to exposed populations. Fine volcanic ash can cause respiratory problems, eye irritation, skin rashes, and other health complications. Communities exposed to ashfall may also experience increased risks of respiratory tract infections, coughing, red eyes, and other related illnesses. In addition, disruptions to normal living conditions may increase protection and hygiene risks, particularly for women and girls who may face difficulties accessing menstrual hygiene products. Considering these risks, health preparedness has been prioritised to reduce potential impacts on communities living near the volcano.

Under early actions, VRCS will focus on strengthening community preparedness and reducing exposure to volcanic ash through a combination of awareness, training, and pre-positioning of essential items. Volunteers will receive training to support community health awareness and response activities, enabling them to disseminate accurate health information and support affected households. Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials will be printed and distributed to ensure communities understand the potential health risks associated with volcanic ash and how to protect themselves.

The operation will also support the replenishment of menstrual hygiene management (MHM) kits to ensure women and girls maintain access to essential hygiene supplies. Access to menstrual hygiene items may also be constrained during volcanic activity due to potential market disruptions, temporary shop closures, and reduced availability of supplies. In addition, in the event of sudden displacement or relocation, women and girls may not have sufficient supplies readily available. Therefore, the provision of MHM kits is essential to ensure dignity, health, and continuity of hygiene practices during the emergency.

Additional preparedness measures include replenishing solar lamps to support households in the event of electricity disruptions or evacuation, as well as replenishing protective masks and hats to help reduce exposure to volcanic ash. Awareness activities and protection risk awareness sessions will further help communities understand key health risks and protective measures before the hazard intensifies.

Under early response, if an eruption occurs, VRCS will deploy trained volunteers and utilise the pre-positioned supplies to provide rapid community support. Volunteers will continue to promote health awareness, distribute protective items where needed, and provide first aid assistance through community aid posts. These actions will help reduce the immediate health impacts of ash exposure and support communities in managing health risks during the emergency phase.

3. Shelter

Volcanic ashfall can accumulate on roofs and structures, increasing the risk of structural damage, particularly for houses constructed with lightweight materials. Ash accumulation can also contaminate living spaces and reduce the safety and habitability of homes, potentially leading to temporary displacement. Strengthening shelter preparedness before an eruption helps communities understand how to maintain and reinforce their homes to withstand ashfall.

Under early actions, VRCS will support community preparedness by conducting training on Build Back Better (BBB) principles. These sessions will provide guidance to communities and volunteers on safer construction practices and ways to strengthen existing structures to reduce potential damage caused by ash accumulation. Increasing community awareness on safer building practices contributes to longer-term resilience and reduces shelter-related risks in the event of volcanic activity.

Under early response, if the volcano erupts, VRCS volunteers will support communities by providing guidance on safe shelter practices and monitoring shelter conditions in affected areas. This support will help communities identify potential structural risks and take appropriate safety measures during the emergency phase.

Proposed Actions

	Sector	Activities	Budget (CHF)
 Early Actions	WASH	• Distribution and replenishment of bottled water -440 cartons x 1.5liters • Training for volunteers on safe water awareness	CHF 58,559
	Health (public)	• Training of volunteers • Printing of IEC materials • Distribution and replenishment of MHM- 400 kits • Distribution and replenishment of Solar lamps- 166HH • Distribution and replenishment of masks- 166 HH*100 pieces • Distribution and replenishment of protective hats- 166HH*5 • Awareness activities • Protection risk awareness	
	Shelter	• Community and volunteers training on Build Back Better	
	NS Strengthening	• Feedback mechanism in communities • Volunteer induction • Shipment of items • Logistics cost (transport from warehouse to wharf, boat to branch office) • HQ logistics volunteer • Deployment of Penama Branch Officer from Pentecost to Ambae • Communication • HR cost • EOC operational cost • Field deployment transportation	
 Early Response	NS Strengthening	• HQ staff deployment to Ambae • Movement of volunteers from home to branch office • Volunteer accommodation during deployment • Staff accommodation during deployment • Staff per diems (HQ staff) • Monitoring costs • Refreshments for field deployment teams • Overhead 5%	CHF 16,441
	Health (public)	• Promote health awareness • Distribute protective items where needed, and provide first aid assistance through community aid posts	
	WASH	• Facilitating access to safe drinking water and reinforcing safe water practices to prevent waterborne disease outbreaks during the emergency phase.	

Sub-total	CHF 75,000
Indirect Cost	CHF 5,000
Total	CHF 80,000

Contact Information

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Click here for the reference