Whakaari / White Island eruption kills 22
9 December 2019

(MCH, 2020zzz)

2019 Dec 09 02:20 pm NZDT
Whakatane
© Institute of Geological and Nuclear Sciences Ltd.

P.

Forty-seven tourists (38 of them passengers on the cruise ship *Ovation of the Seas*) and guides were on Whakaari (White Island) in Bay of Plenty when the active volcano erupted at 2.11 p.m. A sudden release of steam and volcanic gases caused an explosion that launched rock and gas high into the air. The timing was tragic – the uninhabited island is 50 km offshore from Whakatane, and there were people on it for only a few hours each day. Twenty-two died immediately or subsequently from burns or respiratory damage. Most of the survivors suffered severe or critical injuries.

Twenty-three people were rescued immediately by the crew and passengers on a vessel close to shore at the time, who gave what first aid they could. Another 12 were rescued by three commercial helicopter pilots who had seen the eruption from the mainland and took the significant risk of landing on the island while it continued. These men also noted the position of six bodies, which were retrieved by a combined Defence Force/Police operation on 13 December. The bodies of two victims were not recovered – they are thought to have been swept into the sea during the eruption.

Following the tragedy, questions were asked about the appropriateness of allowing 10,000 people a year to visit an active volcano, protected only by breathing masks and hard hats. These were not the first deaths on Whakaari – 10 sulfur miners were killed in 1914 by a debris flow after part of the crater rim collapsed.

In November 2020 WorkSafe, New Zealand's primary workplace safety regulator, laid 13 charges under the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015. Police were also investigating the deaths on behalf of the coroner. Matters were complicated by the fact that, as an offshore island, Whakaari is not within the jurisdiction of any local authority.

External links

Volcanoes (Te Ara)

2019 Whakaari / White Island eruption (Wikipedia)

5th