

“CANBERRA, Oct 8 2006 (Reuters) - A volcano which erupted on the Papua New Guinea island of New Britain causing panicked residents to flee homes has returned to near-normal activity and the danger of fresh eruptions has passed, volcanologists said on Sunday. Mount Tavurvur on the outskirts of the former provincial capital, Rabaul, erupted on Saturday with a blast that shattered windows up to 12 km (7.5 miles) from the volcano.”

The comparatively minor October 2006 volcanic eruption on the Papua New Guinea island of New Britain is, nevertheless, another reminder of an often close relationship of active volcanoes with human habitation, a balance of amenity with a risk that defies isolation from contexts not always otherwise of peace, quietude and co-existence, and by which it may be exacerbated.

The island of New Britain, 590km (370 miles) in length and a maximum of 80km (50 miles) in width, extends northeast from the Papua New Guinea mainland; Rabaul is situated at its extreme tip. A rugged mountain range runs the full length of this largest island of the Bismarck Archipelago, administratively divided across its length to form East and West New Britain.

Rabaul was established as a deep-water port on the northern edge of a naturally formed harbour, 14km north to south and 9km across, the caldera of a once massive volcanic eruption into which the sea entered at its eastern side to form one of only three deep-water landlocked harbours in Papua New Guinea. Rabaul became the largest town in New Britain, sitting within its caldera and surrounded by six recent and active volcanoes¹, several of which have produced major explosive activity during recent time. Vulcan, on the west side of the harbour, formed during a large eruption in 1878, erupted simultaneously with Tavurvur on the eastern side, in 1934. Vulcan, previously an island, erupted again in 1937 killing 507 people and joining itself to the mainland. It was Tavurvur that erupted again in 2006.

In 1994, simultaneous explosive eruptions, again of Vulcan and Tavurvur, covered Rabaul with volcanic ash up to 75cm deep (2.5 feet), causing the roofs of many buildings to collapse. Heavy rains turned the ash into mud that later dried hard. Four of five deaths were from the collapse of roofs, the other one from lightning. Practiced eruption drills facilitated the evacuation of 50,000 people, nearly all of the town population, before the start of the eruption, but abandonment of Rabaul was inevitable and a new administrative centre was constructed twenty kilometres away at Kokopo.

Germany claimed the Bismarck Archipelago as a protectorate in 1884, Rabaul being established in 1910 as the headquarters of the administration of German New Guinea. Taken by an Australian force at the start of World War I in 1914, German New Guinea was later administered by Australia as the (League of Nations) Mandated Territory of New Guinea, of which Rabaul the capital was developed as a regional centre. As a result of the 1937 eruptions, the administration relocated in 1939 to Lae, on the northern

mainland coast. As a result of Japan's entry into World War II in 1941, women and children were evacuated from Rabaul which was bombed and taken by Japanese forces in January 1942 - being developed again to become a more powerful base. By 1943, 110,000 Japanese were based there; tunnels being built as protection against Allied bombing and bombardment, by which Rabaul was entirely destroyed but remained in Japanese hands until 1945.

After World War II, the capital of the new Papua and New Guinea was established at Port Moresby in former Papua on the mainland but, due to commercial pressure favouring its deep port, the northern administration relocated from Lae back to Rabaul - which was again entirely redeveloped. Papua New Guinea became self governing in December 1973.

The 1937 population of Rabaul was around 5,000; in 1974 it was 30,000. The two thousand people evacuated from Rabaul in 2006, reported to have been 90 percent of its population, indicates a greatly reduced total of about 2.25 thousand - less than five percent of what it had been before 1994.

Rabaul's natural deep-water harbour and its consequent strategic location, have been reasons for its economic success but, within its caldera, the converse was severe risk and vulnerability to multiple volcanic activity. Military interests preceding and during times of war, nevertheless overrode that risk, with severe consequences for post-war activity and habitation. Rabaul has had to wait until all its colonial occupiers, military and otherwise, had withdrawn, before taking its own decision to relocate all but the working port as its response to extraordinary natural hazards - the continuation of which is indicated by this most recent eruption, one more event within the Rabaul caldera.

REFERENCES

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NOTES

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Principally: Tovanumbatir (North Daughter); Kabui (The Mother); Turangunan (South Daughter); Tavurvur or Matupi; and Vulcan. Matupi is an island formed by eruption within the ancient caldera.

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