

WHEN INDONESIA'S ANGRY 'CHILD OF KRAKATOA' RUMBLLED

Relevant for: World & Indian Geography | Topic: Important Geophysical phenomena - Earthquakes, Tsunamis & Volcanoes

Shattered home: A home on Carita beach, Indonesia, damaged by Saturday's tsunami that may have been caused by the Anak Krakatoa volcano. AFP/SEMI

The volcano that triggered a deadly tsunami in Indonesia late on Saturday emerged from the sea around the legendary Krakatoa 90 years ago and has been on a high-level eruption watch-list for the past decade.

Anak Krakatoa (the "Child of Krakatoa") has been particularly active since June, occasionally sending massive plumes of ash high into the sky and in October a tour boat was nearly hit by lava bombs from the erupting volcano.

Experts say Anak Krakatoa emerged around 1928 in the caldera of Krakatoa, a volcanic island that violently erupted in 1883.

Altitude of 300 metres

With subsequent lava flows it grew from a submarine setting to become a small volcanic island, with the cone now standing at an altitude of around 300 metres (1,000 feet) above sea level.

Since its birth, Anak Krakatoa has been in a "state of semi-continuous eruptive activity", growing bigger as it experiences eruptions every two to three years, volcanology professor Ray Cas from Monash University in Australia said.

"Most of the eruptions are relatively small on the scale of explosive eruptions... and there's also eruptions that produce lava flows," he added.

Mr. Cas said the latest event appeared to be "a relatively small explosive eruption" but could then have triggered or coincided with a submarine event like a landslide or earthquake, causing the deadly tsunami.

No one lives on the island, but the peak is popular with tourists and is a major study area for volcanologists.

The island is part of the Ujung Kulon National Park, "demonstrating on-going evolution of geological processes", since the Krakatoa eruption, UNESCO says on its World Heritage site listing for the area.

When Krakatoa erupted on August 27, 1883 it shot a column of ash more than 20 km into the air in a series of powerful explosions that were heard in Australia and up to 4,500 km away near Mauritius.

The massive cloud of ash plunged the area into darkness for two days. The dust gave rise to spectacular sunsets and sunrises around the world the following year and disrupted weather patterns for years.

The tsunami triggered by the eruption killed more than 36,000 people in one of the world's worst natural disasters.

Rare occurrence

Tsunamis triggered by volcanic eruptions are relatively rare, caused by the sudden displacement of water or "slope failure", according to the International Tsunami Information Centre. Unlike those caused by earthquakes, which trigger alert systems, they give authorities very little time to warn residents of the impending threat.

The destructive wave on Saturday left a trail of uprooted trees and debris strewn across beaches. A tangled mess of corrugated steel roofing, timber and rubble was dragged inland at Carita beach, a popular spot for day-trippers on the west coast of Java.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies said the "powerful waves" reached a height of 30-90 cm.

Indonesia's proximity to the junction of three continental plates, which jostle under immense pressure, makes it particularly vulnerable to earthquakes and eruptions.

The archipelago nation has nearly 130 active volcanoes, forming part of the Pacific "Ring of Fire" — an arc of intense seismic activity that stretches from quake-prone Japan through Southeast Asia and across the Pacific basin.

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