

August 27<sup>th</sup> 2021

## **RESETTLING AND REBUILDING LIVES AFTER THE ERUPTION**

### **Introduction**

The explosive eruption of the La Soufriere volcano on April 9, 2021, caused significant disruption to the lives of thousands of Vincentians living in the northern part of mainland Saint Vincent, designated as the red zone. Once the evacuation order was given, the process of moving for more than 20,000 Vincentians began and for many what would happen next was uncertain. In the months leading up to April 9, 2021, since the beginning of effusive eruptions in December of 2020, much consultation and information sharing had taken place, to prepare residents in the red and orange zones especially for what would happen in the event of an explosive eruption. The truth is, that no amount of advisories and simulations could have fully prepared residents for the eventuality of the eruption. However, every care was taken by the authorities to ensure that proper monitoring of the volcano was done and timely updates given. The National Emergency Management Organisation, with the expert assistance of the Seismic Research Centre within the University of the West Indies provided regular updates to citizens on activities at La Soufriere that would assist in their own planning and preparation. Once the eruption occurred, most residents knew where they were to go, either to a designated shelter or in the case of others, to previously arranged private accommodation. This began a period of uncertainty for all citizens, but especially those who had to leave their homes, and their livelihoods, having their lives disrupted in ways unimaginable and not knowing how long a period this disruption would be. During the period of the explosive eruption and immediately after, heavy ash fall and lahar flow caused much damage to infrastructure and private property in the red zone. As it all began to sink in, many residents realised that they would not be returning to lives as they knew it pre-eruption, as for some it would not just be the task of resettling, some would require a rebuilding of property and of their lives essentially.

### **Easing the Burden of Resettling**

Once the all clear was given, based on the advice of the experts monitoring the volcano, residents who remained displaced were given timelines within which they could return to their homes. The government, through NEMO provided continuous updates to assist those who would be returning to their homes after almost 5 months away to prepare themselves. Some residents had used the opportunity previously to visit their homes and make assessments, and where practicable, begin the process of removing ash and other debris on their property. Some residents were faced with the harsh reality that they would not be able to return to their property immediately because of

damage to the physical structure, while others would not be able to return to that property because of extensive damage, or the threat posed to property based on the location. The government is ensuring that those who have returned home are offered assistance during the process of resettling and NEMO, working with the Ministry of Social Development and other ministries and departments is providing support for those residents. The residents returning home, are practically restarting their lives and while there may be moments of anxiety, the government is providing much support and assurances that together we would get through this. From the provision of transportation for residents and their personal items, to ensuring that food packages are immediately available once they have settled, the government has put things in place to ease the burden and address whatever anxiety our brothers and sisters may be experiencing.

### **Rebuilding and Relocating**

Comrade Ralph has spoken publicly on the government's intention to assist the worst affected residents whose homes have been significantly damaged or are in areas deemed unsafe and unfit, by relocating them to areas that are safer. Lands have been identified, and the process is in an advanced stage for the construction of homes for those who are to be relocated to this new location. This is just another of the many examples where our ULP administration has provided assistance in the form of housing to nationals impacted by natural and in some cases manmade disasters. Engineers and other experts from the Ministry of Housing and BRAGSA are already making assessments and doing the necessary preparations to begin physical work on the construction of these homes. To this end, contractors including those closest to the red zone are encouraged to register so that they can be included among the workers used to carry out the construction work that will begin shortly. The efficiency with which the government has gone about this exercise will no doubt give hope to those who are most impacted as they see the work being done by our government to assist them. In the meantime, those residents who are unable to return to their homes continue to benefit from assistance provided by NEMO and other partners, as they are housed in shelters and offered excellent care considering the circumstances. The period continues to be fraught with challenges for our nation and even more acute for those who had to leave everything behind and must now face the reality that they will not be going back to what they left, but together we will rebuild even better.

### **Conclusion**

Most Vincentians may not be able to relate to the emotions being experienced by residents in the red zone who have moved back to their communities this week and their attempts to get their lives back on track after the La Soufriere eruption. Our government has however committed to making

this transition as seamless as possible, for those residents who were most severely impacted, by providing much needed assistance. As we work together; government, residents, contractors, it is important that residents exercise patience, as the government does the work in providing the support needed to restore their lives back to pre-eruption status and put this nation on a path to recovery after a very challenging period.