

Hawaii National Guard Soldiers and Airmen respond to Lava on Hawaii Island



Hawaii Army and Air National Guardsmen talk to a local Pahoa resident about community concerns in Pahoa, Hawaii, Oct. 31, 2014. Guardsmen were called to the area to support the Hawaii County Civil Defense as the Puna lava flow makes its way downslope. They patrolled neighborhoods and blocked roads from curious onlookers as the lava flow advances towards homes. (Hawaii Army National Guard photos by Staff Sgt. Katie Gray/Released) [Videos available here](#)

Story by Major Jeff Hickman. PAHOA, PAHOA, Hawaii - About 80 Hawaii National Guardsmen were activated on State Active Duty Oct. 29 to support Hawaii County Civil Defense with security and presence patrols in neighborhoods directly affected by a lava flow that threatens the town of Pahoa.

Joint Task Force RESPONSE is made up almost entirely of Hawaii Army and Air National Guard personnel who are from the Island of Hawaii. The all-volunteer force was put together in three days and started its mission by receiving training that would help set the troops up for success.

"The training was tailored specifically to the mission requirements, enabling our soldiers and airmen to successfully support the Hawaii County Police Department and Hawaii County Civil Defense," said Master Sergeant Ha

Chi, 1-299th Cavalry operations sergeant, Hawaii Army National Guard. "Training topics included security operations, Humvee operator training, media engagement and legal briefings prepared by the staff judge advocate."

Soldiers and Airmen were positioned at entry control points on the streets that surround the lava flow to provide additional security and privacy. Only residents and official agencies are allowed into the restricted area. Tourists and curious onlookers were turned away.

"We hear from some of the residents that they like the military presence," said Staff Sgt. Jason Hardman, client systems journeyman with the 291st Combat Communications Squadron, Hawaii Air National Guard. "They feel a little safer."

One resident, John Milare, a 45-year home owner from the Hawaiian Acres

neighborhood, said that he feels comfortable with the presence and thinks it prevents looting.

"It's always good to see the National Guard out assisting the community," Not only are the Guardsmen standing watch on Pahoa Village Road, but they are conducting roving patrols in five neighborhoods that are affected by the lava flow's path. Many residents have already packed their belongings and moved out. Some residents only took what they could carry and moved somewhere safer as a temporary solution.

"We are proud and grateful that so many volunteers from our island have stepped up to support and safeguard our Puna neighborhoods during this difficult time," said County of Hawaii Mayor Billy Kenoi. "The National Guard is helping to keep our residents safe. Their presence allows all of us to rest a little easier."

The people from the Puna district of Hawaii Island, and more specifically, Pahoa, know the Hawaii National Guard's capabilities first hand. In September 2014, another natural disaster, Tropical Storm Iselle, slammed into Puna district and the Hawaii National Guard responded by delivering ice to residents, clearing fallen trees from roads, and conducting security patrols with Hawaii Police Department.

"As a National Guard member, any chance we get to help the state is awesome," said Master Sgt. Aaron Mar, 291st Combat Communications Squadron. "With Iselle we had to be flexible and it was very stressful, but with this lava flow, there was more time to plan and train. The community really appreciates our efforts and even though my part is small, the impact is larger on them. It is a great feeling."

Many Hawaii Guardsmen live or have family members who live in neighborhoods affected by the lava flow. Staff Sgt. Malia Soares, a unit supply specialist with the 29th Brigade Support Battalion, packed up her parents so they could quickly evacuate their home in Pahoa.

"My mom notified the whole family in a mass text that they were going to pack up," Soares said. "They attended a community meeting where a map showed two likely paths of the lava going right around our family home."

Soares grew up at the house that is lo-

ated below the current location of flow front. The land was given to them by family and the house built by family.

"All the kids and grandkids came back to Pahoa and we had one last shindig. We laughed, we cried, and we reminisced as we packed up all the big stuff and the valuables in the house for my parents," Soares said. "They are still living there, but they are ready to move when it becomes unsafe."

The lava flow has been moving between one to 20 yards a day and entered the town of Pahoa by crossing the neighborhood's first road, Apana Street, Oct. 25. The front tip of the flow is on residential property and now has multiple break outs which threaten those who live downslope. No homes have been destroyed yet but many families in the path have left or are ready to evacuate at a moment's notice.

If the lava flow continues and crosses the major highway in the area, Highway 130, the town of Pahoa would be split in half. Many residents would lose access to town resources such as banks, schools, the post office and supermarkets.

If cut off, residents would have to drive approximately 70 miles in the opposite direction of the lava flow to get access to those lost necessities. Currently, the lava flow is 480 feet away from the Highway 130.

"The lava flow has stalled, but new fingers and breakouts have occurred about a mile from the front," said Steven Brantley, U.S. Geological Survey, Hawaii Volcanic Observatory. "The flow started on June 27, 2014 and currently the source is still pumping out lava at about 25 percent of its highest capacity. We do not know when the flow will end nor can we predict when it will become more active."

There is no end date set for the end of the National Guard mission.

"The job that our Airmen and Soldiers are doing is amazing," said Lt. Col. Garrick Yokoe, Joint Task Force RESPONSE Commander. "They volunteered for this first-of-a-kind mission and are representing the Hawaii National Guard proudly during their presence patrols and entry control point security. It is an honor to support the community of Pahoa, our partners in Hawaii County Civil Defense, and the Hawaii Police Department."