Tsunami survivors endure freezing conditions and food shortages

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Of the estimated 700,000 people made homeless or evacuated in Japan after last Friday's devastating earthquake and tsunami, about 430,000 are in makeshift emergency shelters. Many remain without basic necessities, including food, electricity, heat and fuel. It has been snowing in the affected areas in the country's north-east, with overnight temperatures plunging to –5 degrees Celsius (23 Fahrenheit). The situation poses grave dangers to the lives and health of survivors, especially the elderly.

Japan's National Police Agency has raised the official death toll as of midnight Wednesday to 4,314, across twelve prefectures, while another 8,606 people remained unaccounted for in six prefectures. The government says that across the country, almost 2 million households are still without power, while millions more are subject to rolling blackouts. An estimated 1.6 million people lack water.

People across Japan live in fear of more destructive aftershocks. An earthquake registering 6.0 on the Richter scale shook Tokyo yesterday afternoon.

The final death toll is likely to be well above 10,000. Rescue and search and recovery teams are only now entering some areas hit by the tsunami. The work of searching through the vast area of debris and destruction is difficult and time consuming.

The *New York Times* reported on efforts in the coastal town of Kesennuma, in Miyagi Prefecture, where 300 emergency workers spent four days combing an area less than a mile long and 450 yards wide, to recover 81 bodies. "About 20 percent of the damaged area here has been searched," Ken-Ichi Sato, who heads Kesennuma's emergency operations, said on Wednesday. "Parts we can't reach because we can't get into the area, and parts haven't been searched because there's so much debris to clear away."

Japan's Kyodo News reported that in the prefectures of Iwate, Miyagi and Fukushima, local police made the "exceptional move" of announcing the names of the victims based on their belongings, before a definitive forensic identification was completed. Some morgues have run out of space, so temporary morgues have been set up in tsunami-damaged public buildings, including schools, hospitals, and gymnasiums. According to Kyodo News, at several crematoriums in Miyagi Prefecture, fuel used to cremate bodies would soon be exhausted. The *Guardian* reported that in the Miyagi Prefecture town of Ishinomaki, the local government was considering mass burials.

Six days after the natural disaster struck, the survivors are enduring extremely difficult conditions. They have lived without light or heat, an ordeal made worse by the plunging temperatures, snow and hail storms reported in the past day. The national broadcaster NHK reportedly advised people to wrap themselves in clingfilm and newspaper to keep warm.

"It has been snowing heavily, which has disrupted the whole search and rescue effort," Pat Fuller, of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, told the *Guardian* from Otsuchi, where more than half the 19,000 population is thought to have died. "It has been doubly difficult for survivors. They are lying on sheets of cardboard on the floor and they are huddling up trying to keep warm all day. Temperatures have been as low as -5?C and were -1?C today. You

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can imagine what it is like for people living in the wrecks of their homes."

Many people have been supplied with little more than a golf-ball sized serving of rice each day. Other reports described refugees receiving a hot meal in the evening, but no breakfast or lunch. The *Asahi Shimbun* reported that at one shelter in the town of Ayukawahama, Miyagi Prefecture, high school students foraged in the rubble for food and then washed canned foods, nutritional drinks and soy-sauce bottles with buckets of muddy water.

Because there is no running water, no showers are available, and many people remain in the clothes they were wearing when the earthquake struck. Communications are also down, though limited phone services have been provided to some people in the shelters and others have been able to charge their mobile phones using generator-powered points in public places.

The sick and the elderly are especially vulnerable to disease and health problems caused by the cold weather and lack of food. Moreover, many survivors lost their prescribed medicines in the earthquake and tsunami. Children are also at risk. The Save the Children charity reported that one-fifth of the displaced population were children and warned that many would have been orphaned.

There are continued food and fuel shortages in Sendai, a city of one million people that was hit by the tsunami. The Associated Press reported one queue outside a central Sendai supermarket that stretched for 700 metres, three people deep, in freezing temperatures and heavy snow. In another queue at a grocery store in Kashshimagai, outside Sendai, Yoshiko Tsuzuki, a 55-year-old housewife standing beside her husband and 16-year old daughter said: "Yesterday, we ate a bit of rice and one egg. We're hungry. I want to buy water and anything to eat. We need everything."

According to Japan's Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Ministry, 1.24 million meals and 700,000 beverage bottles had been sent to five prefectures, including Iwate, Miyagi and Fukushima, between Saturday and Tuesday morning. But the *Yomiuri Shimbun* reported that emergency supplies sent to the tsunami-hit areas were piling up in municipal government buildings and designated storehouses, and not reaching the emergency shelters. Authorities blamed petrol shortages and the destruction of road and transportation networks for the problems.

Food and fuel shortages are spreading beyond the worst affected areas, as more people are panic buying because of the Fukushima nuclear crisis.

"For the first few days after the crisis there was a surreal disconnect between the scenes of chaos and devastation along the coastline, and the orderly, affluent, seemingly undisturbed communities just a few miles inland," a reporter for the *Guardian* noted. "It was possible for journalists at that time to visit the disaster zone during the day and drive back to a restaurant and hotel in the evening. But the impact is now rippling outwards as supplies become scarce."

The report continued: "Supermarkets and convenience stores across the north-east first sold out of jerry cans as queues lengthened at petrol stations, then they ran out of batteries when the government announced plans for rolling power cuts. In the panic buying that followed the first explosion at the Fukushima nuclear power plant, shops imposed a 'two bakery items per person' limit. Many shops have also run out of blankets, sanitary pads, nappies, toilet paper, instant noodles, torches, and anything else that people preparing for disaster might need."

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