

Earthquakes in Japan kill 42 people, injure 1,000

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Two major earthquakes and hundreds of aftershocks starting last Thursday have left a trail of death and destruction through the southern Japanese island of Kyushu. The response of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his government has been a military one—despatching some 20,000 troops as part of rescue and relief operations.

According to the US Geological Survey, the largest of the quakes hit in the early hours of Saturday morning with a magnitude of 7.0, following an earlier earthquake measuring 6.2 on Thursday night in the same area. According to Japan's Meteorological Agency, there had been 478 tremors up until 9 pm yesterday, of which more than 70 were strong enough to cause damage.

The death toll from the twin earthquakes rose to 42 on Sunday after the body of a 61-year-old woman was discovered in her collapsed home in Minamiaso. Many of the victims were elderly. As well as those killed in building collapses, several people died in fires and landslides. About 11 people are still missing as rescuers continue to search through rubble. More than 1,000 people were injured, including about 190 in a serious condition.

The worst affected area was the Kumamoto Prefecture, with significant damage also in neighbouring Oita Prefecture. As many as 196,000 people were evacuated in the two prefectures as of Sunday morning, but the figure dropped to 110,000 later in the day as some began returning to their homes. By Sunday evening some 250,000 homes were without water, 100,000 without gas and 39,000 without electricity in Kumamoto Prefecture.

The quakes not only destroyed homes but collapsed or damaged other buildings and structures. According to the NHK national broadcaster, a 500-bed municipal

hospital was one of several buildings badly damaged in Kumamoto City, forcing the evacuation of patients. The Great Aso Bridge—a single span of more than 200 metres—collapsed into the ravine below. Sections of a stone wall surrounding the 400-year-old Kumamoto Castle collapsed into the moat on Saturday afternoon.

High-speed rail services, or shinkansen, have been suspended in Kyushu and the island's two main highways have been cut by landslides. The Kumamoto airport was shut. Meteorological Agency spokesman Gen Aoki said on Sunday that earthquake activity was continuing and warned: "There is an ongoing possibility of ground slips from more tremors or the rain since yesterday."

Major corporations including Toyota, Honda, Nissan and Sony, have been forced to temporarily suspend operations in many parts of the country as damage to plants in Kyushu threatened to disrupt the supply of parts. A Toyota supplier Aisin Seiki was assessing the situation at its two plants in Kyushu that produce door and engine parts, but stated that it would boost production elsewhere to minimise the impact.

The *Financial Times* commented: "Japanese companies have learnt lessons from the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, where car factories from Nagoya to Alabama ground to a standstill after production halted at Renesas, a supplier of microcontrollers used in vehicles worldwide." Renesas subsequently strengthened the level of quake resistance in its plants and maintained higher levels of inventory.

The 2011 disaster killed 15,000 people and led to the partial meltdown of three nuclear reactors at the Fukushima power plant resulting in the evacuation of hundreds of thousands. The catastrophe, which will take decades to clean up, exposed the collusion of government agencies and the plant's operator, TEPCO,

in covering up safety breaches.

The Kyushu Electric Power Company was quick to issue a statement saying that its two nuclear power plants had not been affected and continued to operate normally.

While major corporations concerned about profits have taken action following the 2011 disaster, the death and destruction on Kyushu over the past week raises questions about what action has been taken by governments to protect the population. According to *USA Today*, the area affected by the twin quakes is a largely rural, mountainous region where some homes and structures lack modern earthquake-mitigation technology.

The Abe government has responded to the disaster by announcing that 20,000 troops would be sent to Kyushu to assist in rescue and relief efforts. The use of the military in disaster operations, which figured prominently in the response to the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, is an element of the country's remilitarisation and the increasing intervention of the armed forces into civilian life.

The Pentagon has also been quick to send military assistance with the US-based *Military Times* reporting that an undisclosed number of US Marines are already on the ground in Kyushu. At least four MV-22 Osprey aircraft are also part of the relief operations—with another four on standby. The US Marines were flown from the Philippines where they have been participating in the annual joint US-Philippines Balikatan war games.

US military involvement in such operations is now so routine that it has its own acronym—HADR or Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief. In the aftermath of the 2011 earthquake/tsunami, in which the US armed forces were heavily involved, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) produced a report entitled “More than good deeds: Disaster risk management and the Australian, Japanese and US defence forces.”

ASPI pointed out: “The primary justification for despatching defence forces to help another country experiencing a disaster is usually humanitarian. But for Australia, Japan and the US, there are several other drivers: reinforcing alliances and partnerships, advancing foreign policy agendas and providing knowledge of operational military capabilities.

The latest disaster in Kyushu offers another opportunity for the US to collaborate closely with the Japanese armed forces to test out personnel, equipment and procedures under the guise of providing humanitarian assistance. The strengthening of the US alliances with Japan, and also Australia, serves more sinister purposes—the military build-up throughout the region in preparation for conflict with China.



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