

Magnitude 7.8 earthquake hits New Zealand

John Braddock
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Thousands of people have been left isolated and two died in a 7.8-magnitude earthquake that hit New Zealand just after midnight Monday. The third most powerful quake in the past century, and just 15 kilometres deep, it was centred near the rural township of Culverden in the South Island. More than 400 aftershocks, some over magnitude 6, were registered throughout the south and in wide areas of the North Island, into Tuesday.

Tsunami warnings were issued for the eastern seaboard and waves of up to 2 metres struck overnight. The fishing and tourism township of Kaikoura was the worst affected, with water and sewage systems down. State Highway 1, which connects the town with Christchurch and the inter-island ferry terminal in Picton, has been cut in both directions. Military helicopters were mobilised to assess damage around the town. A landslip temporarily blocked the nearby Clarence River, which, when breached, caused a large wall of water to rush downstream.

Emergency services confirmed one death at an historic homestead in Kaikoura. Relatives of the family reported having trouble contacting emergency services due to congested phone lines and power cuts. A second person died of a heart attack at a property in Mt Lyford. The navy ship HMNZS Canterbury is being sent to evacuate 1,100 stranded tourists from Kaikoura on Wednesday, while the Chinese government chartered a helicopter to get Chinese nationals out of the stricken town.

An estimated 100,000 landslides have hit the northern Canterbury and southern Marlborough regions. Large tracts of State Highway 1 are blocked and remote areas of the South Island are cut off. The town of Waiau, close to the earthquake's epicentre, has been isolated by slips and road damage. Power poles are down, large cracks are visible in the roads, bricks have fallen from the sides of many houses and chimneys have fallen

from buildings.

Rural fire chief Richard McNamara said a number of vehicles were stuck on State Highway 1, after road and rail tunnels were blocked by slips. Rail services throughout the South Island and lower North Island were cancelled, some indefinitely. Cook Strait ferry sailings between the two main islands were cancelled Monday, as well as many long-distance bus services. Power is out in many areas.

Roads on the East Coast remain closed following massive slips and it could be weeks before they are ready to reopen. Freight remains stalled until roads and rail lines are cleared. Road Transport Forum chief executive Ken Shirley said there will be "severe disruption" to freight. "The weeks ahead are a worry. Logistics these days is governed by the just-in-time ethos," Shirley said. "For a lot of these fast moving consumer goods, a couple of days will mean there will be shortages."

There are risks a major aftershock could trigger more slips, as happened during the aftermath of the 2011 earthquakes.

On the North Island, the capital city, Wellington, was badly shaken. The central city was virtually deserted on Monday after residents were warned to stay away and engineering inspections carried out. The TSB Arena sports venue and Bank of NZ Centre sustained damage. There is major damage to the CentrePort wharves and the ferry terminal.

Shipping workers were forced to flee the Kings Wharf freight terminal, after cracks began appearing and water spurted from beneath them. "It was just panic stations," one worker told media. "Water was coming up from the wharf. We had about five seconds to evacuate." He and seven workers ran out and huddled for protection in case glass or debris fell from nearby buildings. Liquefaction appeared in reclaimed land between the city and the inner harbour.

Schools from North Canterbury to Wellington were told to remain shut until damage can be assessed, disrupting national exams.

A worker from the Taylor Prestons meatworks near Wellington told the WSWS that upon arriving onsite Monday morning, kill chain workers walked out due to their concerns over industrial safety and their families' safety at home.

The Red Cross predicted a huge humanitarian challenge, saying dozens of its volunteers were struggling to get to affected regions. St John has activated its National Crisis Coordination Centre and has set up local Emergency Operation Centres in the South Island.

A state of emergency has been declared in the upper South Island. Speaking from parliament's civil defence bunker, Prime Minister John Key said all 16 regions had activated civil defence requirements.

An incoming severe weather system was predicated to bring 140 kmph (87mph) gale force winds and heavy rain to hit Wellington and other areas on Monday evening, sparking fears the weather could exacerbate damage.

The causes of the quake appear to have been complex. The US Geological Survey said it was a result of an "oblique-reverse" fault that occurs when two tectonic plates are moving toward one another, and after enough tension is built up, one slips up over the other, releasing the tension. The epicentre of the quake was close to the Hope Fault, one of the major faults that mark the boundary between the Pacific and Australian Plates. In the area there is a maze of fault lines, some of which were responsible for the earthquakes of 2010 and 2011 that devastated Christchurch, causing 185 deaths.

Visiting Kaikoura on Monday, Key tried to strike an encouraging note. "I know from the Christchurch earthquakes how much it undermines people's confidence, but I want to reassure people that there will be support there," he said. Key said the cost of the quake is expected "run into billions of dollars," but claimed New Zealand is in "great shape" to meet any costs from the quakes.

In fact, questions are already being asked about the implications for insurance claims in the wake of widespread anger over the performance of the government's Earthquake Commission (EQC) and private insurance companies following the Christchurch

quakes. Five years on, entire suburbs have been abandoned and large areas of the central city remain rubble-strewn. A quake on February 14 this year produced further destruction, resulting in more than 2,000 claims.

The ruin of the lives of tens of thousands of residents has been caused by the government and corporate response, not the earthquakes themselves. Approximately 5,000 home owners are still waiting for insurers to settle claims. Many people have been living in overcrowded, badly damaged or makeshift housing for half a decade, leading to health problems from dampness and mould. Due to substandard workmanship, EQC has been forced to re-examine at least 5,500 of its repair jobs.

The day before the official 2011 anniversary last February, almost 1,000 people protested in the city, demanding an external review of the handling of insurance claims by the EQC. The protesters also called for an official deadline by which insurance companies would have to settle claims.



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