Earthquake hits Taiwan, killing eight people and injuring hundreds

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8 February 2018

A magnitude-6.4 earthquake hit eastern Taiwan's port city of Hualien just before midnight local time on Tuesday, causing some buildings to tilt severely and crumble. At least eight people were killed and over 260 injured. Rescue teams are still searching in the rubble for at least 60 missing people.

Built in 1977, the 10-storey Marshall Hotel's lower floors collapsed, trapping residents and leaving the building slanting on its side. Many people remain stuck in the bottom two floors. Emergency workers used large beams, raised with a crane, to prop up the building in a bid to prevent it from toppling further.

Rescuers have been digging "nonstop on the backside of the building" in an attempt to rescue people caught on the lower floors, Hualien County fire commander Zhu Zhe-min said.

Six hundred military personnel and more than 750 firefighters have been aiding the rescue efforts, according to Taiwan's Central Emergency Operation Center. Volunteer rescue worker Yang His Hua said it was "the worst earthquake in the history of Hualien, or at least over the past 40 years that I've been alive."

Apart from the Marshall Hotel, the worst-hit structures were in a nearby residential area. Five more buildings were badly damaged, including a hospital and the 12-storey Yunmen Tsuiti apartment block, which is now leaning at a more than 40-degree angle.

One Yunmen Tsuiti apartment resident told Agence France-Presse: "I saw the first floor sink into the ground. Then it sunk and tilted further and the fourth floor became the first floor." An elderly resident who was inside his apartment at the time of the quake said: "Everything fell down. My bed was completely vertical, I was sleeping and suddenly I was standing."

Hualien is a popular tourist destination and home to around 100,000 people. After the earthquake, about 40,000 homes were left without water and an estimated 1,900 without power. Water supply has been returned to some 5,000 homes and power to around 1,700. The government reported that two bridges in the city were either cracked or could not be used and that many roads were buckled and dangerous.

The earthquake's epicentre was about 9.5 kilometres deep and 21 kilometres northeast of the city, according to the United States Geological Survey.

Taiwan is part of the "Ring of Fire"—a geological formation that runs around the Pacific Ocean where large continental tectonic plates meet. It is known for regular volcanic and seismic activity. The island sits on the boundary between the Eurasian Plate and the Philippine Sea Plate, which are converging at 80 mm per year.

Taiwan's Central Weather Bureau said at least 15 aftershocks, measuring as much as 4.8 in magnitude, shook the area yesterday afternoon and evening and warned that more—up to magnitude-5.0—are expected in the next two weeks. A 5.7 quake occurred near Hualien later that day, hampering recovery efforts.

Residents have been told to stay away from their damaged homes. About 800 have taken shelter in community buildings, including a newly-built baseball stadium, where relief organisations provided emergency supplies. However, with the powerful aftershocks and the warnings of more, many people have resorted to sleeping in tents and cars.

Tuesday's quake followed about 100 smaller tremours that hit the area in the preceding three days, including two shocks, magnitude-5.3 and -6.1, recorded within 45 minutes of each other on Sunday night.

Chen Kuo-chang, the acting director of the Central Weather Bureau's Seismology Center, said the seismic pattern was stronger than anything previously recorded

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in the area. “It is unprecedented and not a normal release of energy,” he told CNN. While earthquakes were common, he added, it was rare to have so many quakes in short succession.

Taiwan’s worst earthquake in recent decades was a 7.6-magnitude quake in September 1999 that killed around 2,400 people. Just two years ago, a 6.4-quake, the same magnitude as this week’s, struck the southern city of Tainan in February 2016, killing 117 people. Many of those killed were residents of the 16-storey Wei-kuan apartment complex, which toppled on its side, burying many of its residents in the rubble.

An investigation into the safety of that building revealed that metal cans and foam had been used as fillers in the concrete. Five people were charged, including the developer and two architects. Prosecutors said they “cut corners,” affecting the building’s structural integrity.

Thus far, no similar issues have been raised in regard to Tuesday’s earthquake. But the fact that so many structures were badly damaged is a further indication that building standards in the earthquake-prone island are inadequate. Without proper infrastructure and earthquake-proof buildings, many more lives will be lost in future events.

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