

Typhoon wreaks havoc in Japan

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Japan is reeling from the devastation wrought by Typhoon Hagibis earlier this month, which caused landslides and mass flooding. The official death toll has climbed to 84. Another 9 people are missing and 356 suffered injuries. While the typhoon dissipated October 20, further storms are expected over the coming days.

Last Sunday, the Fire and Disaster Management Agency reported that 56,753 homes were flooded or damaged by the typhoon, surpassing the 51,000 that were hit by last year's torrential rains in western Japan, which killed more than 200. Over 370,000 homes suffered power outages as a result of the latest typhoon, according to the Tokyo Electric Power Company.

The government also announced that around 4,000 people have taken refuge in evacuation shelters. Some 78,000 homes are without water supply.

The storm was the most powerful to hit Japan in decades and is part of an uptick in natural disasters in the region influenced by warming seas. It has caused an estimated \$9 billion in insured losses, meaning that of the 10 most expensive Japanese typhoons since 1950, four will have occurred in the past two years alone.

One of these storms, "Typhoon Faxai," hit Chiba Prefecture only a month ago, killing three and injuring 147 others. Around 30,000 homes were either destroyed or damaged, 900,000 were left without power, and \$7 billion in damages were incurred.

The same region was battered by the latest typhoon with many houses still covered in blue tarps undergoing repair when Hagibis struck.

The speed of the storm's build-up was also significant. Dubbed "Hagibis," meaning "swiftness" in Filipino, the National Weather Service reported that its initial formation took place south of Japan near Guam, accelerating from a tropical storm into a Category 5 in a matter of six hours. Wind speeds increased from 63km/h to over 250km/h, in one of the fastest typhoon intensification rates on record in the Western Pacific.

It also made an unusually rapid move northwest through the Mariana Islands, travelling at speeds of up to 34km/h before being downgraded to a Category 2 storm as it approached Japan.

The storm made landfall on the evening of October 12, triggering a tornado in Ichihara City that killed one and injured five others. A freak 5.7 magnitude earthquake also hit the Kanto region half an hour before the storm arrived. While no damage to buildings was recorded, it made the area increasingly prone to landslides.

Damage was also exacerbated by poor preparations for extreme weather events. Following "Typhoon Faxai," the Japanese government was widely criticised for failing to hold a meeting of relevant ministers before or after its landfall.

Similar concerns have been raised about the response to Hagibis. Evacuation and disaster prevention measures were not initiated until October 10, when a disaster management meeting was held involving ministers and state agencies. Over 12,600 officials were called up in Chiba to distribute free sandbags, prepare and serve in evacuation shelters as well as to assist public health nurses.

On October 11, Yasushi Kajihara, director of the Japan Meteorological Agency's Forecast Division, announced the first evacuation warnings at a news conference. By midday, around 3.25 million people were given non-mandatory evacuation orders.

The director of the Japan Riverfront Research Centre, Nobuyuki Tsuchiya, warned that the capital was especially prone to damage from storm surges, as 1.5 million people live below sea level.

Not until the afternoon of October 12, when record-breaking rains and high winds battered Tokyo, were over 432,000 residents in the Edogawa Ward told to move to emergency shelters, with 214,000 houses in the area susceptible to flooding. The government was

also forced to issue its highest level of emergency rainfall warnings, advising another 8 million people to evacuate their homes to avoid flooding.

Yukihiro Shimatani, a watershed management expert at Kyushu University in Fukuoka, said that far more people were ordered to leave their homes than poorly-equipped shelters had room for.

An evacuation center in Taito Ward, Tokyo, turned away two homeless people on the day the storm hit, prompting widespread criticism. Staff told them the shelter was reserved for ward residents only.

“The wind was strong and it was raining, and I wanted them to let me in,” a 64-year-old homeless man told the *Asahi Shimbun*. He was forced to spend the night outside in lashing wind and rain protected only by a plastic umbrella.

In Chiba, over 13,500 took refuge in makeshift shelters in temples, schools and municipal buildings. Norio Fukuahara, a Kyonan town official running a shelter at an elementary school, was overwhelmed with 90 people taking shelter, after expecting only 30.

“I think people really have a sense of crisis,” he said. “After the last typhoon, that’s natural. We hadn’t had such an experience before. We used to say, ‘Oh, a typhoon is coming. That’s dangerous,’ and that was all.”

The storm unleashed torrential rain as it tore northwards through Honshu with some areas experiencing more than 939.5mm of rain in 24 hours. There was widespread river flooding and flash floods, with levees breaking at 55 locations. According to weather officials, some areas received 40 per cent of their annual rainfall in just two days.

Floodwaters also rose in northern Fukushima, raising concerns over radioactive contamination from the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster.

“There’s never been this much damage before,” Moe Kaneda, a teacher in the area told the *Independent*. “This is the first time ever.”

In the midst of the rising death toll on October 13, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe issued a tweet celebrating the victory of the national rugby team over Scotland, equating the “power” of the national sports team to the Great East Japan earthquake in 2011. “To those affected by the typhoon,” he said, “I think that it is very energetic and courageous.”

More than 110,000 personnel, including 31,000

troops, were involved in rescue efforts throughout the disaster as well as providing power supply vehicles. Abe promised “all-out efforts” this week to intensify search and relief efforts, pledging some 500 billion yen (\$US4.6 billion) to the effort.

Meanwhile, two more storms threaten the southern end of Japan. The Japanese Meteorological Agency said Tuesday that over 300mm of rain is expected from tropical storm Neoguri, leading to further possible flooding and landslides. Another storm, Typhoon Buolai, is expected to pass by Japan’s eastern coast later this week, setting the stage for more flooding.



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