

Earthquake strikes central Japan leaving dozens dead

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A powerful 7.6 magnitude earthquake struck along the west coast of central Japan on Monday afternoon while many families gathered to celebrate the new year. As of Wednesday morning, at least 57 people have been killed, though this number may grow as rescuers search the impacted area. It is the deadliest earthquake since 2016 when 273 people died in the Kumamoto earthquakes.

The epicenter of the quake was located on the Noto Peninsula at a depth of 16 kilometers. The peninsula juts out into the Sea of Japan and is a part of Ishikawa Prefecture. Most of the deaths have taken place in Wajima and Suzu, two cities located close to the epicenter. More than 200 aftershocks have subsequently been recorded, leading the Japan Meteorological Agency to warn that another serious earthquake could be coming over the next week.

In the immediate aftermath of the quake, approximately 100,000 people were forced to evacuate due to the widespread destruction and the danger of a tsunami striking the coast. While a large tsunami did not materialize, some waves reaching as high as 1.2 meters struck Wajima Port, sweeping through the city and washing away cars. Trains and flights in the region were also delayed.

The earthquake was one of the strongest for that region of Japan in four decades. “I’ve never experienced a quake that powerful,” Shoichi Kobayashi, a 71-year-old resident of Wajima, stated. “Even the aftershocks made it difficult to stand up straight.”

Other countries in the region were also affected, though no casualties or significant damage were reported. The Korea Meteorological Administration in South Korea reported tsunamis as high as 85 centimeters striking the country’s east coast. North

Korea and Russia also issued their own tsunami warnings.

The Noto earthquake has caused widespread damage, destroying buildings and roads, causing fires, and cutting off power and water to tens of thousands of homes while temperatures drop to freezing levels at night. Evacuees occupied school gymnasiums, community centers and greenhouses converted into shelters. In some cases, people slept in their cars.

The mayor of Suzu, Masuhiro Izumiya, told a meeting of the Ishikawa Prefectural government’s disaster response team on Tuesday: “We have a feeling that about 1,000 houses have been completely destroyed.” He added that thousands more were nearly completely destroyed. The city has 5,857 households, according to government data.

Many people are still unable to return to their homes. Less than half of the evacuees were able to do so as of Tuesday night. An estimated 33,000 homes were without power while 20,000 did not have running water.

The government has so far dispatched about 3,000 rescue personnel, including firefighters, police, and troops from the Self-Defense Forces, the formal name of Japan’s military. However, search teams have struggled to reach areas stricken by the earthquake, with at least 120 known cases of people awaiting rescue as of Tuesday night.

In response to the disaster, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida released the type of empty statements that come from capitalist governments after such tragedies. Attempting to give the impression that he was in control of the situation, Kishida stated during an emergency meeting, “We must rescue [survivors] as quickly as possible, especially those who are trapped under collapsed structures.” The prime minister, who is

deeply unpopular due in part to an ongoing corruption scandal involving the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, is no doubt sensitive to anything that can further damage his image and ability to remain in power.

While it is not possible to predict the exact moment an earthquake will strike, the damage caused by natural disasters is regularly compounded by the subordination of public safety to the capitalist profit system. This earthquake is no different and there are already indications that a lack of preparation has made things worse.

Suzu's Mayor Izumiya has stated that evacuees are lacking basic supplies, saying Tuesday, "There is a shortage of everything: water, food, milk, diapers, and feminine hygiene products. Blackouts and water shortages will continue for a while." Other survivors have also stated that they are running out of food.

Hiroko Aoki, a woman in her 70s, told the *Japan Times*, that she evacuated along with 40 other people to an elementary school that lacked heat. "I was really scared," she stated. "Since it's a gym, it was very cold and there was no radio or TV, so I had no idea what was going on."

Japan is highly susceptible to earthquakes, sitting along fault lines where four tectonic plates meet. Major earthquakes have struck the country in recent years, including the devastating Great East Japan Earthquake and subsequent tsunami in 2011 that killed 20,000 people. The tsunami severely damaged the nuclear power plant at Fukushima, leading to a meltdown that was covered up by the plant's operator, Tokyo Electric Power Company.

Furthermore, experts have been warning that Japan is likely to experience a major earthquake within the next few decades. The government reported last year that earthquake activity around the Noto Peninsula had been growing since 2018. Seismologists have also stated that the Kanto region, which includes Tokyo, is likely to suffer an event similar to the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake, which reached a magnitude 7.9 and killed as many as 142,000 people.

Despite this, according to the Japanese government's 2022 "Disaster Management in Japan" white paper, Tokyo spent only 542.716 billion yen (\$US3.8 billion) on disaster prevention in 2022, which was the lowest since 2011 and one of the lowest overall since 1986. The government also slashed spending from the

previous year when its disaster prevention budget reached 1.108 trillion yen (\$US7.8 billion).

By contrast, Tokyo is sharply boosting spending in preparation for a US-led war against China. Last month, Kishida's cabinet approved a new military budget for the 2024 fiscal year, reaching a record high of 7.95 trillion yen (\$US56 billion). One of the main pillars of the new budget is the procurement of cruise missiles, giving Japan the ability to launch attacks on China in flagrant violation of the country's constitution. The increase is part the government's plan for a de facto doubling of its military budget by 2027.

In line with other capitalist governments around the globe, the slashing of the disaster prevention budget also comes as Kishida's government has falsely declared the COVID-19 pandemic to be over. The ruling class is sending the message that workers, the poor and the elderly will all be left on their own as Tokyo pursues remilitarization and its imperialist interests overseas.



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