

# Conditions deteriorate for survivors of Noto earthquake in Japan

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17 January 2024

In the nearly three weeks since a devastating 7.6 magnitude earthquake struck central Japan on New Year's Day, tens of thousands of survivors remain in perilous conditions, many displaced and lacking access to basic necessities such as running water.

As of January 17, at least 232 deaths have been confirmed while nearly two dozen more remain missing, meaning the death toll will likely continue to rise. At least 12,443 residential buildings have been damaged or destroyed in cities in Ishikawa Prefecture along Japan's west coast, particularly on the Noto Peninsula where the quake struck. Rain and snow have also made it difficult for rescuers searching for victims.

In the immediate aftermath of the quake, around 100,000 people were forced to evacuate their homes. Of this number, approximately 19,000 remain in evacuation centers while others have moved to hotels or are staying with family members. Many evacuation centers continue to lack basic supplies, including clean water and food, leading to a deterioration of sanitary conditions. This has led to the spread of disease, including COVID-19 as the pandemic continues to rage in Japan despite claims to the contrary by the government of Prime Minister Fumio Kishida.

Some of the hardest hit by the disaster have been the elderly who are reluctant or unable to leave their villages. Many are also reliant on assisted living facilities. These nursing homes, which were already experiencing labor shortages before the quake, are in many cases now incapable of providing adequate care for their residents. The central government plans to dispatch approximately 1,700 care workers to the region by the end of February. However, the labor shortage is nationwide and many facilities around the country cannot send personnel.

Hospitals have also struggled to treat patients, facing

the same problems as evacuation centers and assisted living homes. The director of the Wajima Municipal Hospital, Makoto Shinagawa, recently detailed the struggles his facility has experienced, telling the *Asahi Shimbun*, that many of his staff were unable to reach the hospital while a significant amount of medical equipment had been damaged. He also stated there was little hope of the water supply being restored to the hospital any time soon.

In addition, many hospitals lack COVID-19 testing kits and are therefore unable to identify suspected cases. As of January 15, there have been at least 90 confirmed cases, though many hospitals and evacuation centers cannot quarantine patients testing positive due to a lack of space and the ability to heat separate spaces.

More than 55,000 homes are without running water. Basic services may not return until the end of March. However, an official from Suzu, one of the hardest hit cities, stated that a full recovery will take even longer: "We face the daunting task of redoing the entire area for both water and sewage. It will probably take years to fully restore the system."

Lacking access to water is nothing new following large-scale earthquakes. After the 1995 Kobe earthquake, 1.3 million homes lost access to water for up to three months. Following the devastating 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, 2.56 million homes lost water, with some waiting up to five months for access to be restored.

Yet installing earthquake-proof pipes has been far from a priority for successive Japanese governments. Despite the fact that such natural disasters are common, only 41.2 percent of water pipes across Japan met seismic-resistant standards as of 2021. In Ishikawa Prefecture, a region that had been experienced

increased numbers of earthquakes since 2018, the figure was even less at 36.8 percent.

Given all this information, it is clear that the region was not prepared for a major earthquake. While it is not possible to predict the exact moment an earthquake will strike, there are steps that can be taken to mitigate the impact.

Yet avoidable problems began almost immediately after the earthquake. Many of the evacuees were cut off from help with shelters lacking elementary safety provisions such as radios to contact rescuers. Many makeshift centers also lacked heating as temperatures dropped to freezing levels.

Little has changed since then, with the Kishida government taking only minimal steps to address the crisis. This includes so far allocating just 4.7 billion yen (\$US31.7 million) in emergency funds to support evacuees, a pittance compared to the amount supplied to the military. By comparison, Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa was in Kiev on January 7, pledging \$US37 million to NATO to spend on the war against Russia in Ukraine. Such involvement in the US-instigated war not only diverts necessary funds away from public need, but directly flouts Japan's constitution, which forbids Tokyo from taking part in wars overseas.

Tokyo is also rapidly increasing its military budget in alignment with the US drive to war against China, which includes a de facto doubling of military spending by 2027. Last December, Kishida's cabinet approved a record budget for the 2024 fiscal year of 7.95 trillion yen (\$US54 billion). Yet the disaster prevention budget for 2022 was cut to one of its lowest levels since 1986.

Much has also been made in the bourgeois press, both in Japan and abroad, about the country's supposed commitment to disaster preparation. However, the Japanese political establishment is no more dedicated to safety for the working class, poor, and elderly than the ruling classes in other countries.

To the extent that safety measures are in place, it reflects the concern in Japanese ruling circles that a massive disaster could generate widespread social discontent, which is particularly true now in the face of worsening economic and social conditions. In the current crisis of capitalism and Tokyo's commitment to the drive for imperialist war alongside Washington against China, what little remains of even these inadequate measures is now being torn up.



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