

# Ten dead after major quake strikes Taiwan

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Taiwan was hit by a major earthquake estimated at magnitude 7.2 on the Richter scale—the most severe since 1999 when the island was devastated by a quake measuring 7.3. As of Friday afternoon, 10 people had been killed, 13 were still missing and more than 1,000 had been injured. Hundreds remained trapped in remote areas due to damaged and blocked roads.

The earthquake struck the less populated east coast of the island at around 8 a.m. on Wednesday morning, impacting the city of Hualien, damaging buildings and sending people fleeing into the streets. Schools and workplaces were closed across large areas of the city and thousands of homes were without power.

According to the Central Weather Administration (CWA), there had been 502 aftershocks up to noon on Friday, including two exceeding a magnitude of 6, and 18 ranging from magnitude 5 to 6.

Emergency workers have begun to repair dozens of damaged buildings and demolish four deemed impossible to save. These include the 10-storey red-bricked structure, known as the Uranus building, shown in many news reports leaning at a precarious angle. Much of the city, however, appears to be largely unscathed.

To date, most of the deaths occurred in rural areas outside of Hualien. Citing local authorities, CNN reported that four people had been killed while hiking in the remote Taroko Gorge, another four died on mountain roads and one was working in a quarry. One person was killed in the collapsed Uranus Building when she returned to retrieve her pet cat.

Rail services which were suspended have mostly returned to normal after workers removed huge boulders from the tracks. Taiwan's Centre for Science and Technology (CST) said that initially people and vehicles had been trapped in the Dachingshui tunnel. The fire agency reported that 64 workers were trapped in one coalmine, and six in another. Food and supplies have been air dropped to people trapped in remote areas.

In Taipei, the capital located in the north of the island, news footage has shown damaged buildings, smashed cars

and businesses disrupted by damage. On Wednesday, the earthquake also triggered tsunami alerts in Japan and the Philippines, but these were later downgraded.

International news reports have contrasted the relative low level of death and destruction compared to the devastation caused by the earthquake of comparable magnitude that hit the island on September 21, 1999, as known as “921 quake.” It caused 2,415 deaths and severe injuries to 11,305 people as well as extensive destruction—with 51,711 buildings completely destroyed and 53,768 severely damaged. Power was lost for days due to damage to power stations, transmission lines and the automatic shutdown of the island's three nuclear power plants.

Anger over the extent of the destruction and chaotic rescue and relief efforts was reportedly a factor in the defeat of the ruling Kuomintang in the presidential election in March 2000. Following the 1999 quake, stricter building codes were instituted to ensure greater quake resistance. A program began to strengthen existing public buildings and encourage private owners to do the same.

While earthquakes cannot be predicted with any precision, an early warning system was established that sends messages to mobile phones and automatically cuts into live TV programs if a large tremor is detected. The warning is just a matter of seconds, but can give people near the epicentre enough time to get outside to safety.

The Western media has painted a rosy picture of Taiwan's earthquake protection measures. One obvious difference between the quake this week and in 1999 was that the later occurred in the middle of the night when most people were asleep and unaware of what was happening.

It is undoubtedly true that tougher building codes have made a difference. The shoddy buildings at the time became death traps. Prior to the 1999 quake, only buildings over 50 metres tall underwent a process of peer review. None of those collapsed while many just under 50 metres in height did.

Nevertheless, as in every aspect of capitalist society, profit rules. Tai Yun-fa, a structural engineer who runs Taiwan's Alfa Safe that develops quake-resistant building materials, told the *Japan Times* that some developers were still cutting corners. "The focus when it comes to development is still the lowest price, so in that case you can't have the best quality," he said.

Taiwan, which lies on the fault lines of the Pacific "Rim of Fire," is prone to earthquakes and major companies have spent heavily on quake protection. In 1999, the Hsinchu Science Park, housing the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) and other companies that produced a significant portion of the world's computer memory chips, shut down for six days causing a trebling of prices on the world market.

TSMC, which has expanded to manufacture around half of the world's computer chips and 90 percent of the most advance ones, instituted a long-term program to protect its plants and was quick to announce that it was back in production after this week's quake. While its plants were some distance from the epicentre, TSMC did suspend some operations. A small number of tools were damaged, but there was no harm to critical tools, it said.

As has been the case with earthquakes around the world, the areas of Taiwan's Hualien city worst affected are most likely to have been in poorer areas where older buildings have not been strengthened and newer shoddy ones have been constructed by developers cutting corners.

While the Central Weather Administration suggested on Friday that aftershocks were moderate, there is still the possibility of further large tremors. An earthquake in one area of the island has the potential to destabilise faults in other parts. One area of particular concern was Chiayi County in southern Taiwan, where the Meishan Fault is nearing its once-in-a-century activity cycle.



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