# Major earthquake hits southern Japan

**Peter Symonds**
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A powerful earthquake struck the Kumamoto Prefecture on the southern Japanese island of Kyushu yesterday at 4:27 p.m. local time. At least 13 people are dead and hundreds have been hospitalised. The death toll is likely to rise as search-and-rescue teams scour damaged buildings looking for those people who are still missing.

The US Geological Survey initially put the magnitude of the quake at 7.1, but later revised the figure downwards to 6.8. The main tremor was followed by significant aftershocks in the next half hour: one of magnitude 5 at 4:29 p.m. and two more of magnitude 4 at 4:39 p.m. and 4:59 p.m. More than 60 tremors of a smaller magnitude have followed. Tsunami warnings were issued but lifted at 6:10 p.m.

The Aeon shopping mall in Kumamoto City was extensively damaged after part of its second floor collapsed followed by an explosion that ripped through the huge complex blowing out some of the walls. Two women in their 20s were killed and another person reportedly suffered from a cardiopulmonary arrest. While several hundred people were evacuated from the mall, some are still missing. The explosion may have resulted from the ignition of leaking gas, but that is yet to be confirmed.

The mall, one of the region's main shopping and entertainment centres, was only re-opened last month after being badly damaged in a devastating earthquake in 2016 that struck the same region, killing 275 people, injuring more than 1,800 and destroying nearly 8,000 houses.

The Nippon paper factory in Yatsushiro City also suffered serious damage with images showing one of its chimneys snapped off. Local officials reported that two people were found in a "state of cardiopulmonary arrest" but could not confirm if they were alive or not. Nine other workers were still missing.

More than 350 people have been treated in hospital with at least some facilities suffering damage from the earthquake. Saiseikai Kumamoto Hospital has suspended non-emergency hospitalisations and has asked people to refrain from outpatient visits, except in emergency cases. The hospital has water leaks and collapsed walls in some buildings.

"People injured by furniture that fell during the earthquake, such as those with fractures, are being brought in one after another. We have 400 beds, but we are already at full capacity," the hospital's public relations director told Japan's public broadcaster NHK.

Around 300,000 people have been evacuated. As of early Wednesday morning local time, 178 facilities had been shut, including libraries, community centers, public parks and sports facilities, some of which have been turned into temporary shelters.

As of 6 p.m. yesterday, more than 48,170 households in Kumamoto Prefecture were without power, according to Kyushu Electric Power. NTT Docomo and KDDI Corp. reported that the quake knocked out or disrupted mobile phone services in some areas.

Transport has also been disrupted with the runway at Kumamoto Airport closed immediately after the earthquake for inspection. The airport office also said that some people had been trapped in elevators in the airport's terminal building due to the quake.

A number of roads have been closed and the region's high-speed shinkansen train services were suspended after the quake. At JR Yatsushiro Station, the quake derailed and overturned a freight train, but there is no news about possible casualties.

Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi yesterday evening issued a pro-forma expression of "heartfelt sympathy to all those affected by this disaster" and declared that the government would put "human lives first" and respond with its "full force" to support communities affected by the disaster.

However, apart from mobilising 3,600 military personnel to assist in rescue and relief efforts, the government has offered little more than basic supplies including food and water along with portable air conditioners and power generators to help prevent heatstroke amid Japan's hot summer weather. Takaichi's

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popularity is falling as public frustration and anger rises over inflation and increased living costs.

Mindful of the catastrophic consequences of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, the Nuclear Regulation Authority was quick to reassure the public that there would be no repetition of the Fukushima nuclear disaster. It reported no abnormalities in the safety functions at the three nuclear power plants closest to yesterday's earthquake.

The Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011, as it is known, was a magnitude 9.1 quake that triggered a massive tsunami reaching as high as 16.7 meters, and devastated Japan's northeast Tohoku region. The tsunami struck the inadequately protected Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, leading to meltdowns in three out of six reactors in the worst nuclear disaster since Chernobyl in 1986.

An estimated 18,500 people were killed, while ten years after the event approximately 2,500 people officially remained missing. Nearly half a million people were forced to evacuate from their homes. Tens of thousands are still unable to return to their homes in the contaminated areas. The decommissioning and clean-up of the nuclear plant is still decades from completion.

Japan is located along the "ring of fire"—the series of fault lines around the Pacific Ocean basin that produces volcanoes and quakes. It is one of the world's most earthquake-prone countries, and accounts for about 20 percent of the world's earthquakes of magnitude 6 or more.

While governments in one of the world's most developed economies have been compelled to devote resources to mitigate the impact of earthquakes and tsunamis, the 2011 triple disaster is a terrible reminder that, under capitalism, private profit overrides all consideration of human life and health.

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