Japanese PM makes brief visit to Kumamoto quake zone

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A week after a powerful earthquake hit the Kumamoto prefecture in southern Japan, the death toll as of Monday has now risen to 38 and extensive damage has been caused throughout many areas. High summer temperatures are creating dangerous conditions for thousands of people who have been forced to leave their homes.

More than 4,600 homes have been damaged and 181 were destroyed by the quake. Amid the current heatwave, some 46,700 households lacked water. A woman in her 70s who was sleeping in her car after the earthquake was found dead from suspected heatstroke. Many people are facing shortages of fuel. The maximum temperature hit 40.3ºC (104.5ºF) in Kumamoto City on Monday.

As of Monday, 8,383 people were still in 162 crowded emergency shelters often in difficult conditions. The shelters include converted community centres, school gyms and classrooms, many of which lack air-conditioning in the sweltering heat. Other people are sleeping in cars in parking lots and parks or outside their homes.

According to Channel News Asia, experts have long warned about the inability of Japan's emergency shelters to cope with disasters. Not only can they quickly become crowded but are lacking in basic facilities including proper sanitation.

Amid falling poll ratings, Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi made a high profile visit on Monday to the disaster area, including to the town of Hikawa, one of the worst hit by the earthquake. Five people in the town were killed when their houses collapsed or from other causes.

Takaichi dropped into one of the area's best-equipped shelters, with beds, cardboard partitions and air-conditioning, provoking criticisms on social media that her appearance simply distorted reality. When her trip was announced on Sunday, one comment on social media bluntly declared: "This visit is meaningless."

The prime minister declared that her government would provide the necessary money for disaster relief. "I want affected municipalities to work with all their might on emergency response and recovery efforts without hesitating because of financial constraints," she said.

What Takaichi announced, however, amounted to a pittance in comparison to the destruction caused by the disaster. She said the cabinet would designate the quake as "a disaster of extreme severity" and provide over 20 billion yen or just $US127 million in assistance for the devastated prefecture. NikkeiAsia reported that in Hikawa alone "collapsed wooden houses could be seen throughout the area around the shelter, along with cracks in roads crisscrossing fields."

During her brief visit, Takaichi flew over the Aeon shopping mall in the town of Kashima and also the Nippon Paper Industries plant in Yatsushiro but did not land. Seven people were killed at the damaged mall in an explosion shortly after the quake believed to have been caused by leaking gas. Nine died at the paper plant where a chimney collapsed.

Two of those who died in the mall were killed by the explosion after being told to re-enter the building by their boss whose only thought was to secure the cash in the shop where they worked. The two were employed in the general goods store Habita and were among the hundreds who left the mall after the quake.

One of two workers who has been named as 22-year-old Kurumi Otake had spoken to a relative before re-entering the building. She said she had to go back in because her company had asked her to move money from the cash register into a safe. She had been

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supporting her mother after her father died three years ago. The other employee has not been named.

The company issued a perfunctory apology for the "loss of two precious lives." According to NHK, Habita sales director Goji Yuse said: "The instructions given at the time were inappropriate, and I truly regret them."

Transport in the affected region has begun to resume. The general roads are passable and Kumamoto Airport has resumed operations but expressways remain out of service and services on the bullet train are still suspended.

The quake damaged factories in the affected zone. Production has been suspended in a number of industries including semiconductors, automobiles and food. The Yatsushiro Port has experienced disruptions due to subsidence caused by the earthquake.

The southern island of Kyushu is a major hub for Japan's semiconductor industry, accounting for 36 percent of the country's integrated circuit production and supplying a wide range of chips for smartphones, automobiles and other products. Kyushu, known as the country's "Silicon Island," is home to some 1,000 semiconductor-related companies, many of them in Kumamoto Prefecture. The Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing (TSMC), the world's largest chipmaker, announced in 2021 that it would build a plant in Kumamoto.

As a highly industrial country vulnerable to earthquakes, Japan has more measures in place to prevent destruction and death relative to other less developed countries that have been hit by powerful earthquakes. Nevertheless, the same priorities of private profit over the social needs of ordinary people operate in Japan as in all capitalist countries. And capitalist politicians like Takaichi are driven by the same cynical motives to make token appearances and offer their insincere sympathy and insufficient funding for the victims.

It should never be forgotten that Japan was the site of one of the world's worst disasters when a magnitude 9.1 quake in 2011 triggered a massive tsunami reaching as high as 16.7 meters, which devastated the northeast Tohoku region. The tsunami struck the inadequately protected Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, leading to meltdowns in three out of six reactors. An estimated 18,500 people were killed and half a million people were forced to evacuate from their homes.

Like the boss in the Habita store, the first thought of Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), which operated the nuclear plant, was to protect its assets not workers. It delayed pumping seawater into the reactors, which may have prevented meltdowns and radiation leaks, because the salt water corrodes reactors. Firefighting resources were also delayed. The wait contributed to the confused evacuation and is believed to have led directly to the deaths of at least 44 people.

After the disaster, it was revealed that TEPCO had at least 200 proven instances of safety inspection falsifications. In July 2012, the NAIIC found that TEPCO had not reinforced its reactors to meet earthquake standards and the regulatory agency, the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency, did nothing to enforce the codes.

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