

INFORMATION BULLETIN



International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
Fédération Internationale des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge et du Croissant-Rouge
Federación Internacional de Sociedades de la Cruz Roja y de la Media Luna Roja
الاتحاد الدولي لجمعيات الصليب الأحمر والهلال الأحمر

JAPAN: NIIGATA EARTHQUAKES

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The Federation's mission is to improve the lives of vulnerable people by mobilising the power of humanity. It is the world's largest humanitarian organisation and its millions of volunteers are active in over 181 countries.

In Brief

This Information Bulletin is being issued for information only. The Federation is not seeking any funding or other assistance from donors for this operation at this time.

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The Situation

A string of earthquakes that hit the Niigata prefecture, northern Japan, over the past two days left at least 23 people dead and no less than 2,000 injured. Tens of thousands were evacuated and many spent a second night in emergency shelters. The full extent of the disaster was still emerging this morning, 25 October, as some communities have been cut off by landslides or damages that left roads impassable. Military helicopters are assisting the relief effort.

The initial earthquake struck at 5:56 pm local time on Saturday 23 October, but aftershocks continued through Sunday and another powerful quake occurred this morning at 6:05 am. The tremors, the deadliest in Japan since 1995 when the city of Kobe was devastated, came within days of the country's worst typhoon in a quarter of a century. Typhoon Tokage's torrential rains last week are blamed for leaving hillsides unstable, contributing to huge mudslides brought on by the quakes.

Ojiya city, about 260 kilometres northwest of Tokyo, was the epicentre of the first quake that measured 6.8 on the Richter scale. It flattened houses, precipitated landslides, tore open roads, brought down overpasses and rocked buildings as far away as the capital. A Shinkansen bullet train heading from Tokyo to Niigata was derailed although miraculously no passengers were injured. Many strong aftershocks followed through to Saturday night and Sunday, causing the region to suffer widespread power and gas cuts as well as disruptions to the water supply. The Japanese government said that 59,000 people from 36 Niigata communities were evacuated, but higher figures have been reported by the media. Some hospitals, overwhelmed by the injured, have turned corridors into makeshift wards.

Among the dead and injured are many children and elderly. The media reported an elderly Ojiya hospital patient died after the tremors dislodged an artificial respirator, and a second-floor supermarket crowded with customers collapsed. Concern for 600 people still isolated in the Niigata village of Yamakoshi was voiced this morning, and inhabitants of the Tarusawa and Shionomata areas of Tokamachi municipality are also cut off. The damages there have yet to be assessed.

The affected area was said to register more than 240 aftershocks. Most of them were minor, but among them were two serious tremors following the initial quake, registering 6.2 and 5.9 on the Richter scale. Monday morning's tremor was reportedly 5.6 and initial reports said at least one more building in Niigata collapsed. There is fear that further strong tremors could occur in the coming days.

Red Cross and Red Crescent action

Nagaoka Red Cross Hospital in Niigata treated 312 injured people and Tokyo, Saitama, Toyama, Niigata, Tochigi and Gunma chapters as well as the Japanese Red Cross medical centre at national headquarters deployed Red Cross hospital disaster relief teams. The medical centre also despatched a domestic emergency response unit (ERU).

The relief teams of doctors, nurses, pharmacists and coordinators run mobile health clinics at emergency shelters located in schools and public buildings in Ojiya, Tokamachi and Nagaoka. Nurses trained in psychological support are present to assist the traumatised. Close to 7,000 blankets, food, water, and kits of hygiene items and daily necessities have been distributed in an ongoing operation. The teams report that children and the elderly are most affected by the disaster, as many elderly were seriously cut and bruised when struggling to escape damaged homes, while children suffered particularly from cold and exposure.

A domestic ERU model developed from the international one deploys units whenever disaster strikes Japan. The units have some three tonnes of equipment, including an inflatable tent, medical equipment, medicines like anaesthetics and antibiotics, beds, stretchers and a water tank. They can be deployed within one hour in teams of five to ten people, and can treat 200 people a day for up to 72 hours. The unit despatched from the Tokyo medical centre dispenses its medical services from the schoolyard of Ojiya elementary school. Public announcements from a touring Red Cross ambulance have brought a stream of patients to the unit.

The Japanese Red Cross maintains 474 disaster response teams across the country with more than 6,000 medical relief personnel. Of the 91 hospitals run by the Red Cross in Japan, 57 specialise in helping disaster victims.

For longer-term programmes, please refer to the Federation's Annual Appeal.

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