

JAPAN: VOLCANIC ERUPTION

4 April 2000

Information Bulletin N° 1

The Disaster

After several days of significantly increased seismic activity, Mt Usu, 70 kilometres southwest of Sapporo, in Hokkaido, erupted at 1.10 pm on Friday 31 March. The eruption occurred in a southerly direction, causing cracks on the slopes of the 732 metre volcano and sending up a huge column of smoke. Fairly strong quakes measuring less than 5 on the Japanese intensity scale of 7 were repeatedly recorded in areas at the base of the mountain in the latter half of last week, indicating that an eruption was likely to occur. Mt Usu is one of 86 active volcanoes in Japan and last erupted in 1977\78, causing three deaths.

Emergency bulletins and warnings released throughout last week by the Muroran Meteorological Observatory and evacuation orders issued by the local authorities meant that some 11,000 people in the nearby municipalities of Date, Sobetsu and Abuta were evacuated to safer areas in advance of the eruption. An additional 5,000 people left the area by Friday evening. So far there have been no reports of any casualties.

The self defence forces provided personnel, trucks and helicopters to assist with the evacuation process and continue to be on stand by in case the situation deteriorates further. Evacuees are currently being housed in public facilities such as schools and gymnasiums or being put up with friends and relatives. Road access to the area continues to be limited and train services have been suspended.

A government body of volcano experts has warned that this might be the start of volcanic activity extending over a long period. Although there are currently no fears of pyroclastic flows, blasts could occur on different parts of the mountain and the local meteorological observatory is concerned that a layer of ash on top of the snow might provoke mudslides.

The government has created an emergency taskforce to cope with the situation. This is the first time such a taskforce has been convened since the Great Hanshin\Awaji Earthquake in 1995. The government is considering setting up temporary housing units to accommodate residents in case their evacuation is prolonged.

Red Cross/Red Crescent Action

The headquarters of the Japanese Red Cross Society (JRCS) has been and continues to be in close contact with the relevant authorities and agencies and sent one member of staff to the Hokkaido Chapter last week to co-ordinate the Red Cross response.

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Thanks to the advance warning system being used by local authorities, the Hokkaido Red Cross Chapter was able to collect and use up to date information contained in the emergency bulletins to prepare relief stocks and to mobilise emergency teams before the eruption took place.

So far, 8,000 blankets, 1,000 food parcels and 2,000 daily necessities parcels have been received from the Aomori, Miyagi, Akita and Ibaraki Prefecture Red Cross Chapters. By 3 April, the Hokkaido Chapter had distributed 7,800 blankets and 500 daily necessities parcels to evacuees. On 3 April, the JRCS headquarters sent 1,000 food parcels to the Hokkaido Chapter.

On 29 March, the Red Cross hospital in Date, the nearest to Mt Usu, dispatched a first medical team composed of 5 medical staff to treat patients among the evacuees staying in the public facilities. Since then, it has dispatched one team per day. The hospital itself has received 33 evacuees who are being housed in the gymnasium and 54 patients who were transferred from a hospital near Mt Usu.

On 3 April, the Red Cross hospital in Date opened a psychological care centre to assist people suffering from stress following their evacuation from the affected area.

The Kuriyama, Hakodate, Asahikawa and Urakawa Red Cross hospitals in Hokkaido have sent mobile medical teams to provide support to those evacuated from the affected area.

Needs

The Japanese Red Cross will continue co-ordinate with the relevant authorities and agencies. It plans to provide medical assistance to people who have been evacuated from the affected area and to distribute emergency relief supplies to those temporarily living in public shelters.

A disaster committee has been set up to receive cash contributions from individuals for a one month period. The JRCS Hokkaido Chapter is a member of this Committee. At the moment, there are no needs for additional relief goods and international assistance is not required.

Peter Rees-Gildea
Director
Operations Funding and Reporting Department

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Director
Asia & Pacific Department

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