

Officials revise downward the number of missing

Quake toll tops 200 as police comb market

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Police on Tuesday began combing the burned-down remains of a market devastated by fire in Ishikawa Prefecture following the massive New Year's Day earthquake, while authorities said the overall death toll had risen above 200.

The number of dead was especially high — 81 — in the hard-hit coastal city of Wajima, where the quake sparked a massive blaze that tore through the popular tourist market.

The number of those missing in the disaster, meanwhile, fell drastically to 102 after jumping to over 300 a day earlier, officials said. On Monday afternoon, the prefecture said 323 people were unaccounted for, having cast a wide net for information on those it had initially been unable to locate. But by Tuesday morning it had determined that more than 200 of those were safe.

Authorities were uncertain of the number of people missing in Wajima ahead of the large-scale search involving about 100 police officers at the Wajima Morning Market, where around 200 buildings were destroyed.

Snow, rain and plunging temperatures have complicated the relief effort in Ishikawa by increasing the risk of landslides, and endangered communities that are isolated due to quake-induced damage to roads.

At a government disaster response meeting Tuesday, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said the relief situation was "still very difficult" due to the aftershocks, snowfall and freezing temperatures.

"There are people who are still waiting for help and do not know if they are safe or not. There are people who are growing anxious in isolated villages. There are families who continue to pray for the safety of their loved ones," he said, ordering ministers to "resolve the situation in isolated (communities) as soon as possible and continue the tenacious rescue effort."

Following the magnitude 7.6 quake on Jan. 1, more than 1,200 aftershocks — including a handful that registered as strong as 5 on the Japanese seismic intensity scale of 7 — have hit the region, and more are expected. The Meteorological Agency has warned of the possibility of quakes with a maximum seismic intensity of a strong 5 or higher striking the area over the next month.

More than 3,100 people in 22 districts within towns and cities remain cut off from the relief effort, prefectural authorities said Tuesday, due to damage the quake and an estimated 1,000 landslides have done to roads on the Noto Peninsula.

The Defense Ministry has sent a total of 6,300 Self-Defense Force troops to help with relief operations, and small groups of troops have made their way to some cutoff areas to deliver aid.

Late Monday, the ministry also said it would begin operating the Ground Self-Defense Force's UH-60JA helicopters for relief missions for the first time. The helicopters had been effectively grounded since a crash involving one of them off the coast of Miyakojima, Okinawa Prefecture, in April last year killed 10 GDSF members.

"In response to the Noto Peninsula earthquake ... and taking into consideration the fact that the road network has been disrupted by the quake and that the affected areas are concentrated in coastal areas, it has become necessary to operate a medium-sized helicopter that can land in a narrow area for air transport and other missions," a statement from the ministry read.

The ministry said the UH-60JA, which can cruise continuously for long periods and can carry large payloads, "was judged to be particularly suitable for transporting goods from transport vessels at sea."

In yet another emerging front in the relief effort, COVID-19 and norovirus cases have been recorded at evacuation centers in Wajima, with concerns growing over the

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The Democratic Progressive Party's Lai Ching-te (left), who is also Taiwan's vice president, faces off against the main opposition Kuomintang's Hou Yu-ih (center) and the Taiwan People's Party's Ko Wen-je on Saturday's presidential election. POOL / VIA AFP-JIJI

Close race emerges in Taiwan poll

Front-runner Lai Ching-Te's lead narrows significantly

Analysis

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Taiwan's ruling Democratic People's Party (DPP) aims to make history this weekend by becoming the self-ruled island's first party to win a third consecutive presidential election — an achievement that would also deal a heavy blow to Beijing's efforts to bring the island closer to China.

Yet expectations that front-runner and current Vice President Lai Ching-te would simply stroll to victory on Saturday have been dashed, as the final weeks of campaigning have seen his main rival, New Taipei Mayor Hou Yu-ih from the main opposition Kuomintang (KMT), significantly narrow Lai's lead in polls.

This has set the stage for what could be

the island's most hotly contested presidential race in decades.

A final set of polls — published Jan. 3 before a 10-day blackout period ahead of Saturday's presidential and legislative elections — consistently put Lai on top, though some by a margin of just 3 to 5 percentage points.

As the world closely follows what could be East Asia's most consequential vote this year, the key question is whether the DPP will be able to hold its lead until Election Day or whether the KMT can pull off a last-minute upset.

"The presidency is the DPP's to lose, but the KMT still has a fighting chance," said Wen-Ti Sung, an expert on Taiwanese politics and cross-strait relations at the Australian National University.

"The simple fact is that this election is about change versus continuity," he said.

While the DPP monopolizes the "continuity votes" after eight straight years in power, he said, the "change votes" are divided between the two major opposition parties: the KMT and the relatively new Taiwan's People's Party (TPP), which is in third place.



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New safety measures unveiled after Haneda crash

YUKANA INOUE
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As investigators suspect miscommunication was the cause of the fatal aircraft collision at Haneda Airport last week, the transport ministry announced on Tuesday new emergency safety measures aimed at ensuring more thorough surveillance and clearer orders on the runway.

The collision between a Japan Airlines (JAL) flight and a coast guard aircraft left five coast guard personnel dead, and released records show that runway entry clearance was not issued to the coast guard plane prior to it entering the runway.

The plan includes changes to how orders should be sent out from the control tower.

It is considered most likely that the coast guard captain misheard "No. 1," a phrase used by the control tower to communicate the order of departure for planes in standby, with this taken as a green light to enter the runway. Given this, the announcement of the departure order will be halted from Monday, since it is not an absolutely necessary step in the takeoff procedure. Instead, the control tower will simply give takeoff clearance, to simplify orders.

Additionally, a new job in which the sole role is to monitor the radar that tracks activity on the runway has been introduced at Haneda Airport. Upon detecting the entry of a plane that has not yet been ordered to proceed, the staff member would immediately notify others. The ministry plans to introduce the same role at other major airports that have such a radar, such as Narita and Kansai International airports.

The plan also requires pilots to relearn the phrases used for orders by the control tower, as well as the repainting of runways of major airports to improve visibility.

The collision occurred Jan. 2 when the coast guard plane, which planned to fly to Niigata Prefecture to deliver aid following the Noto Peninsula earthquake, entered Runway C, where it was hit by the JAL plane, which was making a landing.

Both planes were engulfed in flames within minutes, and although the 379 passengers on the JAL flight managed to flee in time, five of the six coast guard personnel died, with the lone survivor — the captain — being seriously injured.

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Hitoshi Matsumoto halts activities amid sexual assault claims | **NATIONAL, PAGE 2**

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New tensions stir old fears near N.K. border

JU-MIN PARK AND MINWOO PARK
YEONPYEONG ISLAND, SOUTH KOREA
REUTERS

As Kim Jeoung-hee huddled in a bomb shelter on South Korea's Yeonpyeong Island, scared and confused with around 250 other people, memories flooded back of the day in 2010 when North Korean troops shelled near their homes.

Authorities told them to take shelter on Friday as North-South tensions spiked again. This time no-one aimed any shells at the small patch of land just on the southern side of the two Koreas' disputed maritime border.

But the alarm was a reminder of how vulnerable Yeonpyeong remains more than 13 years after the bombardment that killed two soldiers and two civilians there, and left an unconfirmed number of North Korean casualties after South Korea fired back.

"Every time I hear a bang I get scared," Kim said Monday, standing in the same bomb shelter, a bunker buried in a hill with toilets, a small kitchen and blankets inside. "Everyone is living with that nightmare."

Friday's scare came after North Korea fired



South Korean marines patrol the entrance to a beach on Yeonpyeong Island, near the Northern Limit Line sea boundary with North Korea, on Monday. AFP-JIJI

off more than 200 shells a few miles from the island, and still more over the weekend, in what it described as artillery drills. The South responded on Friday with its own live-fire exercises.

The corresponding actions marked a further escalation between the rivals. In November, North Korea said it would deploy stronger armed forces and new weapons on its border with the South, a day after Seoul suspended part of a 2018 military accord in a protest over Pyongyang's launch of a spy satellite.

The breakdown of the 2018 agreement left many on Yeonpyeong fearing they

could be back in the firing line.

Kim said he and other island leaders met with South Korean military officials earlier on Monday to air their concerns about Friday's alarm, including what he said was a lack of clarity and communication.

"Considering what happened 14 years ago, this shouldn't have been dealt with this way," Kim said. "If there's a real emergency, residents deserve to know what really is happening."

The ferry service was also suspended that day, effectively trapping residents on the island, Kim said. "Everyone here has been held hostage," he said.

South Korea's Defence Ministry acknowledged it had not sent the islanders a notice when North Korea started firing on Friday, but said that was because the drills were taking place some distance away.

The ministry said it asked local authorities to send out an alert later after it launched its own exercises, as it worried North Korea might respond.

"In the future, our military will continue to strictly consider public safety-related matters and collaborate with the relevant local government," a spokesperson said.



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