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ASIA:

Chip conundrum

Startup shows that dealing with China won't be easy | **Page 4**



CULTURE:

Race for top Oscar

It's a competitive year in the battle for best picture | **Page 11**



FOOD:

Pacific connections

Japan-Peru ties underlie acclaimed cuisine | **Page 14**



IN TODAY'S NYT:

In India, a conflict over the futures of young women

Page 1

Hundreds in Ishikawa still unaccounted for

Quake rescue teams brace for bad weather

YUKANA INOUE AND GABRIELE NINIVAGGI
STAFF WRITERS

Rescuers in Ishikawa Prefecture are bracing for more bad weather this weekend as they race to find survivors of Monday's earthquake.

Rain and snow is expected in the area, complicating rescue efforts as well increasing the likelihood of landslides. The temperature is expected to stay in the single digits, with authorities issuing hypothermia warnings.

Poor weather conditions have already hindered efforts to find those still buried under collapsed buildings.

In Ishikawa, the death toll was 94, with 222 missing, as of 2 p.m. Friday. At least 460 people are reportedly injured.

The hardest-hit areas are the Ishikawa Prefecture cities of Wajima, with a death toll of 55, and Suzu, with a toll of 23.

The so-called golden window of opportunity for finding victims alive — which lasts

72 hours from the occurrence of a quake — has passed, with the chance of survival now dropping significantly and the urgency of rescue efforts increasing.

As of 4 p.m. Thursday, approximately 730 people in Nanao were cut off from the outside world, with dozens also stuck in neighboring towns, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshimasa Hayashi said Friday.

On Thursday night, just after the 72-hour mark, the Osaka Fire Department managed to save a woman in her 80s in Wajima from under the rubble of her collapsed house. Video footage showed her being carried out of her home, with the rescue squad saying "you're all right now" and "you were so strong for holding on."

Fire departments nationwide have been deployed to Ishikawa in order to help with the rescue efforts. The number of Self-Defense Forces personnel on the ground doubled to 4,600 on Friday as well.

Over 80 disaster medical assistant teams from around the country are using a hospital



Fire department officers rescue a woman in her 80s from a destroyed house in Wajima, Ishikawa Prefecture, on Thursday, just over 72 hours after the earthquake. © OSAKA MUNICIPAL FIRE DEPARTMENT / VIA KYODO

in Nanao as their base to offer medical aid to those in need. However, due to obstructions and poor road conditions, they are having difficulty reaching patients, NHK reported.

The number of houses confirmed to be either destroyed or damaged in Ishikawa has risen to over 300, although the full extent of the damage in Wajima and Suzu has not yet been determined.

Power and water shortages continue to affect tens of thousands of homes in the area. Although water tanks have been deployed in many municipalities where residents can receive them, they have yet to reach Wajima and Suzu.

Around 33,000 people remain in evacuation centers across Ishikawa, and many are expected to stay there for a long time.

Aftershocks continue on the Noto Peninsula, with quakes measuring level 1 or higher on the Japanese intensity scale detected over 799 times as of Friday morning.

The government will initially set aside ¥4.7 billion (\$32.3 million) to provide support to the areas hit by the disaster, but Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said on Friday that he had

Continued on page 2 →

Yen falls as quake raises bar for end to negative rates

MASAHIRO HIDAKA AND YUMI TESO
BLOOMBERG

The yen is coming under renewed pressure as a powerful earthquake that hit Japan on New Year's Day makes it harder for the Bank of Japan to abolish negative interest rates this month.

Morgan Stanley MUFG Securities changed its call for the BOJ rate decision this month and now sees it leaving current policy in place, partly as the central bank has to assess the adverse impact from the Noto Peninsula disaster on the economy. While speculation about a January tweak is receding, many still expect an end to negative rates in April, or later in 2024.

The yen weakened to as low as ¥145.36 per dollar on Friday in Tokyo, from ¥141.04 at the end of 2023 in New York trading. The Japanese currency had been widely expected to strengthen in 2024 on speculation the Federal Reserve would start cutting interest rates in the first half of the year, while at the same time normalization of ultraeasy monetary policy in Japan would narrow the yield gap between the two economies.

"Although there must be quite a few foreign investors who have been anticipating the end of negative rates in January, under these circumstances, the BOJ will almost certainly not move this month," said Daisuke Karakama, chief market economist at Mizuho Bank. "Should negative rates not be lifted in January, ending it in the first half of 2024 will also become doubtful."

Mari Iwashita, chief market economist at Daiwa Securities, removed her forecast for an end to negative rates in January following Gov. Kazuo Ueda's speech on Dec. 25 and his interview with NHK on Dec. 27.

"The January move seems even more impossible," Iwashita said. The earthquake is likely to depress production activity while the government may have to set up a supplementary budget for recovery measures, she said. Iwashita now expects an exit from negative rates in April.

Ueda said Thursday in a speech that the BOJ will be fully prepared to support the

Continued on page 3 →

Coast Guard plane on runway for 40 seconds before collision

JUJI, REUTERS

A Japan Coast Guard aircraft stopped on a runway at Haneda Airport for about 40 seconds before its collision with an incoming Japan Airlines jetliner earlier this week, informed sources said Friday.

The coast guard aircraft proceeded onto the runway although it did not gain permission from an air traffic controller, according to the sources. The crew of the aircraft may not have been aware of the JAL passenger

jet, which was in landing operations.

The Japan Transport Safety Board and Tokyo's Metropolitan Police Department are investigating details of the accident, which killed five of the six crew members of the coast guard aircraft. In the incident, which happened on Tuesday on Runway C at the airport in Tokyo, all 379 passengers and crew members of the JAL flight evacuated from the aircraft, although 15 of them suffered injuries.

Crews at Haneda Airport began clearing

the charred wreck of the JAL plane from a runway on Friday, aiming to complete the removal in a couple of days. The removal of the wreck of the coast guard aircraft was expected to be completed on Friday.

According to communication records released by the transport ministry, an air traffic controller at the airport instructed the coast guard aircraft to taxi to the C5 holding point for Runway C at 5:45 p.m. on Tuesday. The air traffic controller also said the aircraft would be the first to take off. The aircraft

crew replied it would taxi to C5, and read back the takeoff order.

However, the plane crossed the holding point and entered the runway, and stopped there for about 40 seconds before colliding with the JAL flight, according to the sources. In the meantime, the crew of the coast guard plane did not contact the air traffic controller for information about the JAL jetliner, which was in landing operations.

The captain of the JAL plane and others have told the airline that they could not rec-

ognize the coast guard aircraft visually. The captain of the coast guard aircraft has said in voluntary questioning by the MPD that the rear part of the plane suddenly caught fire.

These developments and comments suggest that the crew members of the two aircraft had been unaware of each other's plane.

The MPD will conduct an autopsy on two of the coast guard aircraft's five dead crew members — co-pilot Nobuyuki Tahara, 41, and mechanic Shigeaki Kato, 56. An autopsy

Continued on page 2 →



A life behind the lens
Japanese photographer Kishin Shinoyama dies at the age of 83 | **NATIONAL, PAGE 2**

Japan is back
Tokyo has reemerged as a destination for investment | **OPINION, PAGE 9**

Targeted assault
Israel details new approach in its hunt for Hamas fighters | **WORLD, PAGES 5**

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AI: The entertainment industry's friend or foe?

YUKANA INOUE
STAFF WRITER

Tsumugi-nen is an online entertainer that streams content daily to her over 73,000 subscribers on YouTube, using a virtual avatar of herself. She is a popular VTuber — short for virtual YouTuber — in Japan.

Except, she doesn't quite match that description 100%.

She's actually an artificial intelligence-generated talent developed and managed by 29-year-old Hayato Akedo and his AI talent agency, Pictoria.

He founded the company six years ago as a talent agency for human VTubers, but went on to manage primarily AI ones around three years ago when he came up with the idea of developing a VTuber powered by artificial intelligence, using the technology and talent that his company already had.

"We said we wanted to try making an AI VTuber and set up a crowdfunding campaign online where we ended up raising over ¥5 million — this helped us realize that there was a pretty big interest and demand for this," Akedo recounted.



Tsumugi-nen and other AI talents that Pictoria has developed since then are among many AI-related projects that Japan's entertainment industry is experimenting with. They range from a major tea commercial that features an AI talent and a now-canceled

Tsumugi-nen is artificial intelligence talent agency Pictoria's most popular AI VTuber. PICTORIA

glamour photography book featuring an AI model, to a project attempting to use AI to generate storylines for the famed manga "Black Jack."

Artificial intelligence is a Pandora's box of both opportunities and threats that the Japanese entertainment industry is currently navigating.

The issues surrounding the usage of AI are not unique to Japan. But as a country that has had a close affinity with futuristic technology — its reluctance to ditch old technology such as the fax machine notwithstanding — and whose contemporary culture is rooted in frequent exposure to virtual characters and gadgets that seem straight out of science fiction, Japan may have a uniquely progressive outlook toward incorporating AI into daily life.

Idols, and more

Akedo said that the AI-generated VTubers caught on immediately among fans in Japan because when the original concept of VTubers took off in 2016, many had rejoiced in the fact that a virtual, fictional talent could

Continued on page 3 →



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PAGE: 1

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