

Japan earthquake: Woman in 90s found alive under rubble five days later

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By Vicky Wong

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A woman in her 90s has been found alive under rubble five days after a devastating earthquake struck central Japan. Rescue workers discovered her in the wreckage of a two-storey building in the town of Suzu. The 7.5-magnitude earthquake struck the Japan Sea coast on Monday, flattening towns on the remote Noto peninsula.

More than 120 people have been confirmed dead, and 200 are missing. According to the newspaper Yomiuri Shimbun, 100 rescuers were sent to the town of Suzu after learning that two women were buried alive. Citing local police sources, the newspaper reported that the elderly woman was responsive, but believed to be suffering from hypothermia. At the same site, rescuers also found a woman in her 40s in a state of cardiopulmonary arrest, reports said. The first 72 hours of a rescue operation are considered critical because after that, the chances of finding people alive drops substantially.

The two women were found days after that window closed. Japan's Self-Defense Forces are using helicopters for rescue operations and deliver supplies to isolated areas, as several roads remain blocked. According to public broadcaster NHK, rescue efforts could be hampered by wet weather forecasted for Sunday in some quake-hit areas, with authorities warning that even a small amount of rain could trigger more landslides. They also warned that a cold front is expected on Sunday, which could bring snowfall through Monday in mountainous areas of the quake-hit Ishikawa prefecture.

More than 30,000 people are being housed in government shelters. As of Saturday, around 23,200 households were without electricity in Ishikawa and more than 66,400 lacked running water. Ishikawa's governor Hiroshi Hase said during a disaster management meeting that the prefecture was facing "extremely severe situations". He also warned that restoring running water would take a long time "as many water pipes have cracks". Some hospitals and facilities for taking care of elderly and disabled people have also lost power and water.

Japan is one of the most seismically active countries in the world, and activity has been increasing around Noto since the end of 2020. More than 500 small and medium earthquakes have hit there over the past three years.

Japan: Defence ministry eases haircut rules for troops

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New recruits to the Japanese military will be allowed to have longer hair in a bid to attract more young people, the country's defence ministry has said. The announcement comes as Japan struggles with a shortage of soldiers in the face of growing concerns about China and North Korea. Only buzz cuts were allowed for male recruits, and short hair for females. But from April, the rules will be relaxed to allow troops to have longer hair. Under the new rules, male troops will be allowed to have short back and sides with longer hair on top.

Female personnel will be allowed to have longer hair - but cannot fall onto the shoulders when it is tied up while in uniform - and does not interfere with the wearing of a helmet. According to the Kyodo news agency, news of the relaxed rule was first reported in January during an expert panel meeting tasked with boosting troop numbers for Japan's Self-Defence Forces (JSDF). Defence minister Minoru Kihara said during that meeting: "As our nation faces a serious workforce shortage, we recognize competition with others, including the private sector, to secure talent has been intensifying."

The role of Japan's military since World War Two has been exclusively defensive in line with the country's pacifist constitution. The bid to drive up recruitment comes as Japan grapples with China's rapid military build-up and North Korea's expanding missile and nuclear programs. Last year, Japan announced it would substantially boost its defence spending over the next five years, but the JSDF has been struggling to hit recruitment targets, with officials saying the army is operating at 10% below capacity.

The Japan Times has reported that on top of a declining birth rate and having the world's oldest population, low morale due to poor pay and allegations of sexual harassment has also hindered recruitment. Last year it was reported that the country's defence ministry was also considering moves to allow people with tattoos to join the JSDF.

Tattoos have long been taboo in Japan, where they are associated with yakuza organised crime gangs. Officials have acknowledged that many people who have tattoos are not gangsters and the ban was hindering recruitment.