

The Australian

New Zealand holds two-minute silence as John Key promises full inquiry

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New Zealand Prime Minister John Key takes part in the two-minute silence held as a mark of respect for the victims of the Christchurch earthquake.

Source: Getty Images

NEW Zealand fell silent for two minutes today as Prime Minister John Key promised a major inquiry into the earthquake which has left more than 240 people dead or missing .

"We remember at this time all those who died as a result of the February 22 earthquake," Dean Peter Beck said in Christchurch, which bore the brunt of the disaster.

Search and rescue teams in Christchurch downed tools and Mr Key, who had called for the national period of silence, observed it at the Christchurch Arts Centre, along with his wife Bronagh, and Christchurch Mayor Bob Parker.

The silence began at 12.51pm (10.51am AEDT), one week after the 6.3 magnitude quake struck. In Australia the Parliament also observed silence for the quake victims.

The official death toll stands at 154 and could rise to 240 according to latest estimates.

"There are more than 240 people reported missing (unaccounted for) in the worst-damaged sites in the city. This number will include many, or all, of the fatalities," the civil defence department said in a briefing released this morning.

Mr Key said there were legitimate question about why so many office blocks collapsed when the tremor hit supposedly "quake-proof" Christchurch last week.

"There has to be an inquiry," Key told Radio New Zealand, as rescuers continued to comb the city's ruins for bodies.

"We have to provide answers to people about why so many people lost their lives and we have to learn lessons from the earthquake."

Key said the quake may simply have been a violent act of nature but the country owed it to the dead to find out if the destruction could have been prevented.

"Some things may have been just beyond our control, it's an act of nature and it's had a devastating effect, but we owe it to those people to give them answers about what went wrong," he said.

Officials warned the catastrophe would also hit the country's struggling economy, wiping out any growth in the financial year to June.

"June-to-June could be close to zero growth," Finance Minister Bill English told public radio.

"It's a different outlook from what we expected six months ago but we'll just have to roll with the punches."

John Key had asked all New Zealanders to fall silent at 12:51pm (10.51am AEDT), exactly one week after the 6.3 magnitude quake convulsed the country's second-largest city.

Australia's House of Representatives also fell silent as MPs paused to remember the victims of the earthquake.

In Christchurch, exhausted emergency crews with sniffer dogs and sensitive listening devices are continuing to scour the wreckage but admit hopes of finding more survivors have evaporated.

"It is probably highly unlikely that we will encounter live victims within collapsed structures," the fire service's rescue operation manager Jim Stuart-Black told reporters.

No survivors have been found since a woman was pulled from a collapsed office building on Wednesday afternoon, a day after the quake hit.



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