

## Asia-Pacific



## Japan begins quake relief mission

A mammoth relief mission is swinging into action in north-east Japan, a day after a devastating earthquake and tsunami claimed hundreds of lives.

Whole villages have been washed away and at least one town has been largely destroyed. Police said 215,000 people have fled their homes.

The tsunami was triggered by Japan's biggest earthquake since records began.

Meanwhile nuclear officials said they were checking whether a damaged reactor had gone into meltdown.

The government had earlier declared a state of emergency at five nuclear reactors as cooling systems failed.

Analysts say a meltdown would not necessarily lead to a major disaster because light-water reactors would not explode even if they overheated.

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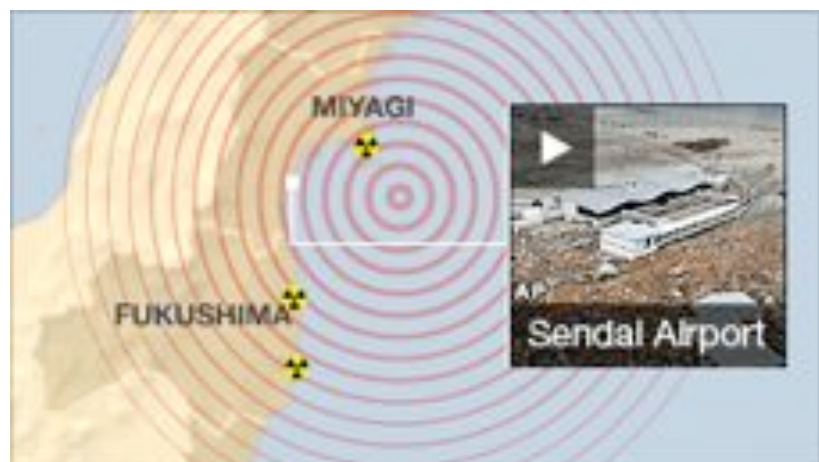
## At the scene

Roland Buerk BBC News, Tokyo

It was only when the sun came up that a more complete picture of devastation began to become a little bit more clear.

From the air it was clear that what had been paddy fields and villages are now sea-water lagoons. The water came in with the tsunami in some places and hasn't gone out again. It must have been very difficult for rescuers to get to those areas during the night.

The scale of the devastation has become clearer too. Overnight we heard snippets of information - 300 bodies found in one ward of one city. In another town, 300 homes engulfed by a wave that came in at rooftop height. Now local media are reporting that a town in Iwate prefecture, home of 23,000 people, has been largely destroyed.



The 8.9-magnitude tremor struck in the afternoon local time on Friday off the coast of Honshu island at a depth of about 24km, 400km (250 miles) north-east of Tokyo.

It was nearly 8,000 times stronger than last month's quake in New Zealand that devastated the city of Christchurch, scientists said.

Japanese police told Kyodo news agency 433 people are confirmed to have died and 784 more are missing.

The country's military has mobilised thousands of troops, 300 planes and 40 ships for the relief effort.

Prime Minister Naoto Kan visited the disaster zone by helicopter early on Saturday.

Among the places he visited was the Fukushima nuclear plant, damaged during the quake.

Mr Kan confirmed that a small amount of radioactive material had been released into the air after technicians were forced to release gases from the reactors in a bid to lower pressure.

Officials have insisted that there is no risk to people in the area, but have evacuated thousands as a precaution.

Meanwhile, rescue teams from South Korea, Australia, New Zealand and Singapore are due to arrive later. US President Barack Obama said a US aircraft carrier was already in Japan and another was on the way.

The quake triggered a tsunami up to 10m (30ft), with waves of 7m battering the Japanese coast.

A muddy torrent of water swept cars and homes far inland, turning residential areas and paddy fields into a lagoon of debris-filled sea water.

One of the worst-hit areas was the port city of Sendai, in Miyagi prefecture, where police said between 200 and 300 bodies were found in one ward alone.

The town of Rikuzentakada, in Iwate prefecture, seemed mostly under water, with barely a trace of any buildings.

Japan Railways said it could not trace four trains along the north-eastern coast, and a ship carrying 100 people was also reported missing.

## “Start Quote

It was the biggest earthquake I have ever felt, I thought I would die”

Several fires were reported in Kesennuma, in Miyagi prefecture, and one-third of the city was also said to be under water.

Some 1,800 homes were reported to have been destroyed in the city of Minamisoma, Fukushima prefecture.

And a dam burst in north-eastern Fukushima prefecture, sweeping away homes, Kyodo reported.

More than 50 aftershocks - many of them more than magnitude 6.0 - have rattled the country.

"It was the biggest earthquake I have ever felt. I thought I would die," said Sayaka Umezawa, a 22-year-old student who was visiting the port of Hakodate.

In central Tokyo, a number of office workers spent the night in their offices because the lifts stopped working.

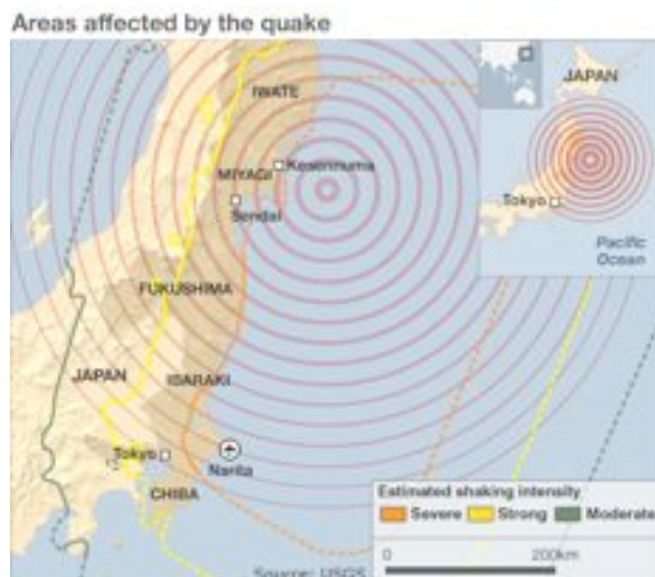
Millions of commuters were stranded overnight and others walked home after train services were suspended. Most services have now resumed.

At least 20 people were injured in Tokyo when the roof of a hall collapsed on to a graduation ceremony.

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## Deadliest earthquakes

**27 July 1976, Tangshan, China:** est 655,000 killed, 7.5



**12 Jan 2010, Haiti:** 222,570 killed, 7.0

**8 Oct 2005, Pakistan:** 80,361 killed, 7.6

**31 May 1970 Chimbote, Peru:** 70,000 killed, 7.9

*Source: USGS*

About four million homes in and around the city suffered power cuts.

The tsunami rolled across the Pacific at the speed of a jetliner but had weakened before it hit Hawaii and the US West Coast.

Thousands of people were ordered to evacuate coastal areas in the states of California, Oregon and Washington.

A port in Oregon is reported to have been seriously damaged by the waves.

In the immediate aftermath of the quake, a tsunami warning extended across the Pacific to North and South America, where many other coastal regions were evacuated.

But the alert was later lifted in most parts, including the Philippines, Indonesia, Australia and China.