

At least 35 killed and 17 missing after Typhoon Hagibis tears through country, flooding rivers and submerging cities

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In the aftermath of the largest typhoon to hit Japan in decades, the nation on Sunday was still assessing the scope of the damage caused by the massive storm.

Hagibis, the 19th named storm of the season, tore through Japan's main island of Honshu on Saturday and early Sunday packing winds of up to 144 kph at landfall, killing 35 and leaving 17 unaccounted for as of Sunday afternoon, according to Kyodo News. NHK reported 166 people were injured.

Cities and towns across the country — including in Nagano, Niigata, Miyagi, Fukushima, Ibaraki, Kanagawa and Saitama prefectures — were inundated by flood waters after levees failed in the face of record rainfall, forcing many people to abandon submerged homes. The damage could worsen in the coming days as the water levels may rise along flooded rivers.

"I extend my condolences for all those who lost their lives and offer my sympathy to those who all those impacted by Typhoon (Hagibis)," Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said at a ministerial meeting on the typhoon held at the Prime Minister's Office on Sunday.

Still, the damage and death toll could have been worse. The nation has recently shown how quick it is able to react and prepare in the face of such potential calamities, with disaster awareness rising more and more among the public in recent years.

As Hagibis approached, authorities urged citizens "to take whatever actions necessary to increase your chances of survival." Residents stocked up on water, food and other supplies, leaving many supermarket shelves empty — something unseen since the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake. Public transportation operators announced plans to suspend services days in advance out of safety concerns and an attempt to prevent chaos at transportation hubs.

As the typhoon crossed the country Saturday night, after making landfall on Shizuoka's Izu Peninsula at about 7 p.m. on Saturday, its strong winds and heavy rains left much devastation in its path. One of the areas hit hard by the storm was Kawasaki, Kanagawa Prefecture, where some residential areas were left submerged after the Tamagawa River flooded. Roaring winds, which shook buildings, walls and windows, along with the heavy rains, led officials to issue an advisory urging millions to evacuate.

The storm was so strong that it caused a Panamanian cargo ship to sink in Tokyo Bay on Saturday night, killing five people.

For many in Tokyo, Hagibis was a rude awakening, illustrating that they, too, are susceptible to natural disasters — especially to heavy rain. Such evacuation warnings are more commonplace in southern Japan, such as in Okinawa Prefecture, where typhoons hit on a regular basis.

Concerns are also growing that there may be more storms similar to Hagibis in the future due to climate change.

As dawn broke Sunday, those living in areas vulnerable to floods and landslides were beginning to take stock of the damage after a long and anxious night.

The Chikuma River in Nagano Prefecture inundated residential neighborhoods in the cities of Nagano and Chikuma. Flood waters engulfed houses and left about 360 people stranded, according to Kyodo News. Firefighters and Self-Defense Forces personnel rescued residents trapped in their homes using helicopters and rafts.

“My father stayed at the neighborhood evacuation center the night before, but he went back to his house around 6 a.m. to check for any damage. He was suddenly trapped inside his house by a rush of floodwater and escaped by climbing to the second floor,” said Yusuke Okano, 39, who was waiting for his father to be rescued from his flooded house in the city of Nagano on Sunday morning. “He then called me for help, so I called the rescuers.”

“We bought him a new car recently, but it must be covered in mud now because the first floor of his house is completely filled with water. He said he didn’t have anything to eat, so I hope he will be rescued soon.”

Okano’s father was safely rescued later in the day.

Noriko Kubota, 79, was stranded on the bridge near her house in the city and had to be rescued by boat.

“City officials came to my home at around 6 a.m. and told me I had to evacuate. I was hurrying to pack my stuff when the flood water suddenly rushed into the first floor of my house and the level soon rose to my ankles,” Kubota said. “At that point, I just abandoned everything and ran to the bridge near my house.”

“I waited on the bridge with my neighbors, but the water level increased to the point where it was touching our feet, so I was terrified. I had never experienced something like this before and didn’t really understand what was going on,” Kubota said.

A fleet of bullet trains were also submerged at a railway yard in the city of Nagano as a result of the levees collapsing along the Chikuma River, NHK reported.

Record-breaking rainfall massively increased the water volume in multiple rivers across several prefectures, including Saitama, Miyagi and Niigata. Some dams were forced to release water, prompting fears among residents who lived downstream.

In the city of Tamura, Fukushima Prefecture, a unknown number of bags containing decontaminated waste from the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant, which had been kept in a temporary holding facility, ended up in the nearby Furumichi River.

A Tamura official told The Japan Times that the city was made aware of the incident at about 9:20 p.m. Saturday. Six bags, each weighing about 1 ton, have been recovered so far. The official said there was no immediate danger to the public.

As of Sunday afternoon, more than 200,000 households in eastern and central Japan were left without power. Among those, as of 3 p.m. Sunday, about 86,100 households were without power in Chiba Prefecture, which was heavily damaged by Typhoon Faxai just last month. About 52,300 such households in Nagano Prefecture and about 23,500 in Kanagawa Prefecture were also without power.

Train operators gradually resumed services by Sunday afternoon after suspensions on Saturday.