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Huge Quake and Tsunami Hit Japan



Kyodo News, via Associated Press

The tsunami, seen crashing into homes in Natori, Miyagi prefecture. [More Photos »](#)

By [MARTIN FACKLER](#) and [KEVIN DREW](#)
Published: March 11, 2011

TOKYO — An 8.9-magnitude earthquake struck off the coast of [Japan](#) on Friday, the strongest ever recorded in the country and one of the largest anywhere in the last century. The quake churned up a devastating tsunami that swept over cities and farmland in the northern part of the country and set off warnings as far away as the West Coast of the United States and South America.

Japanese police officials said that more than 200 bodies were found in Sendai,

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 Martin Fackler Reports From Tokyo



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a port city in the northeastern part of the country and the closest major city to the epicenter, and the government put the official death toll at more than 300. But with many people still missing there and elsewhere, the death toll is expected to rise.

Walls of water whisked away houses and cars in northern Japan, where terrified residents fled the coast. Train service was shut down across central and northern Japan, including Tokyo, and air travel was severely disrupted. A ship carrying more than 100 people was swept away by the tsunami, Kyodo News reported.

The government evacuated thousands of residents in a two-mile radius around a nuclear plant about 170 miles northeast of Tokyo and declared a state of emergency after a backup generator failed, compromising the cooling system. So far, the chief government spokesman, Yukio Edano, said no radiation leaks had been detected.

Prime Minister [Naoto Kan](#) said the quake and tsunami caused major damage across wide areas.

The United States Geological Survey said the quake was the most severe worldwide since an 8.8 quake off the coast of Chile a little more than a year ago. It was less powerful than the 9.1-magnitude quake that struck off Northern Sumatra in late 2004. That quake spawned a tsunami that killed more than 200,000 people around the Indian Ocean.

The survey said that Friday's quake was centered off the coast of Honshu, the most populous of the Japanese islands, at a point about 230 miles northeast of Tokyo and a depth of about 17 miles below the earth's surface.

The quake occurred at 2:46 p.m. Tokyo time, and was so powerful that buildings in central Tokyo, designed to withstand major earthquakes, swayed.

"This tremor was unlike any I've experienced previously, and I've lived here for eight years," said Matt Alt, an American writer and translator living in Tokyo. "It was a

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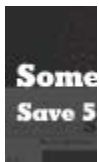


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sustained rolling that made it impossible to stand, almost like vertigo.” Japanese media reported that there had been more than 70 aftershocks were in the hours after the quake. Some of them were of magnitude 6.0 or greater, strong enough to do significant damage on their own.

[President Obama](#) said the United States “stands ready to help” Japan deal with the aftermath. “Michelle and I send our deepest condolences to the people of Japan,” he said in a statement.

American military airfields in Japan began accepting civilian flights diverted from airports that suffered damage, American officials said early Friday.

A spokesman for the American 7th Fleet in Japan said that Naval Air Field Atsugi had received several commercial passenger planes that could not land at Narita. Officials said that Yokota Air Base also received civilian flights. In addition, three American warships in southeast Asia will be ordered out to sea to reposition themselves in case they are

directed to provide assistance, according to a 7th Fleet spokesman.

Officials around the Pacific warned residents of coastal areas to prepare for a possible tsunami, but the initial reports were of minimal to no damage in the first places that the wave reached. Relatively small tsunami waves were reported in Halmahera, Indonesia, but did little harm. Russia, China and Indonesia canceled their warnings after a few hours.

Gauges at Midway Island in the Pacific registered a wave amplitude of about five feet, according to Gerard Fryer, a geophysicist with the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center.

On Hawaii, where the tsunami hit at midmorning East Coast time on Friday, initial wave heights were about four feet above normal sea level, said Paul Huang, a seismologist with the West Coast and Alaska Tsunami Warning Center in Palmer, Alaska. Often, though, wave heights increase over time, with the second or third being the highest, he said. The center had predicted wave heights of six feet.

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Martin Fackler reported from Tokyo, and Kevin Drew from Hong Kong. Daniel Krieger contributed from Osaka, Japan, Bettina Wassener from Hong Kong, Alan Cowell and Richard Berry from Paris, Michael Schwirtz from Moscow, Henry Fountain and Maria Newman from New York, Thom Shanker from Washington, Mike Hale from Honolulu, and Elisabeth Bumiller from Brussels.

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