

Recovery of bodies suspended at Japanese volcano

September 29 2014, by Emily Wang



Firefighters and members of Japan's Self-Defense Forces conduct a rescue operation at an ash-covered cabin, center left, near the peak of Mount Ontake in central Japan, Sunday, Sept. 28, 2014. Mount Ontake erupted shortly before noon Saturday, spewing large white plumes of gas and ash high into the sky and blanketing the surrounding area in ash. Rescue workers on Sunday found more than 30 people unconscious and believed to be dead near the peak of an erupting volcano, a Japanese police official said. (AP Photo/Kyodo News)

(AP)—Japanese soldiers managed to bring down eight more bodies by helicopter from the ash-blanketed peak of a still-erupting volcano on Monday, before toxic gases and ash forced them to suspend the recovery effort in the early afternoon.

At least 31 people are believed to have died. Four victims were flown down Sunday, and rescuers had returned to 3,067-meter (10,062-foot) Mt. Ontake to try to recover the remaining 27. Exactly how they died remains unclear, whether from gases, suffocating ash, falling rocks or other causes.

Scenes broadcast live on Japanese TV station TBS showed soldiers carrying yellow body bags one-by-one to a camouflage military helicopter that had landed in a relatively wide-open area of the now bleak landscape, its rotors still spinning.

The bodies were flown to a nearby athletic field, its green grass and surrounding forested hills contrasting with Mt. Ontake's ash-gray peak in the background, a reduced plume still emerging from its crater.

The bodies were then taken to a small, two-story wooden elementary school in the nearby town of Kiso, where they were being examined in the gymnasium.

Family members of the missing waited at a nearby municipal hall.

More than 200 soldiers and firefighters, including units with gas-detection equipment, were part of the search mission near the peak, said Katsunori Morimoto, an official in the village of Otaki.

The effort was halted because of an increase in toxic gas and ash as the [volcano](#) continued to spew fumes, he said. "It sounds like there is enormous ashfall up there."

Some rescue workers near the summit had retreated to lower areas to stand by. The rescuers reported a strong smell of sulphur earlier this morning, Morimoto said.



A helicopter of the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force lifts a person injured during the eruption on Mount Ontake in central Japan, Sunday, Sept. 28, 2014. Mount Ontake erupted shortly before noon Saturday, spewing large white plumes of gas and ash high into the sky and blanketing the surrounding area in ash. A Japanese police official says rescuers have found more than 30 unconscious bodies believed to be dead near the peak of the erupting volcano. (AP Photo/Kyodo News)

The four brought down Sunday have been confirmed dead, said Takehiko Furukoshi, a Nagano prefecture crisis-management official.

The 27 others are listed as having heart and lung failure, the customary way for Japanese authorities to describe a body until police doctors can examine it.

Saturday's eruption was the first fatal one in modern times at Mount Ontake, a popular climbing destination 210 kilometers (130 miles) west of Tokyo on the main Japanese island of Honshu. A similar eruption occurred in 1979, but no one died.

Japanese media reported that some of the bodies were found in a lodge near the summit and that others were buried in ash up to 50 centimeters (20 inches) deep. Police said only two of the four confirmed dead had been identified. Both were men, ages 23 and 45.

Mount Ontake erupted shortly before noon at perhaps the worst possible time, with at least 250 people taking advantage of a beautiful fall Saturday to go for a hike. The blast spewed large white plumes of gas and ash high into the sky, blotted out the midday sun and blanketed the surrounding area in ash.

Hundreds were initially trapped on the slopes, though most made their way down by Saturday night.

About 40 people who were stranded overnight came down on Sunday. Many were injured, and some had to be rescued by helicopters or carried down on stretchers. By nightfall, all the injured had been brought down, officials said.



Firefighters and members of the Japan Self-Defense Forces carry a person rescued from a cabin on Mount Ontake in central Japan, Sunday, Sept. 28, 2014. Mount Ontake erupted shortly before noon Saturday, spewing large white plumes of gas and ash high into the sky and blanketing the surrounding area in ash. Rescue workers on Sunday found more than 30 people unconscious and believed to be dead near the peak of an erupting volcano, a Japanese police official said. (AP Photo/Kyodo News)

Japan's Fire and Disaster Management Agency tallied 40 injured people, three seriously, and said it was trying to update the number still missing.

Survivors told Japanese media that they were pelted by rocks. One man said he and others went into the basement of a lodge, fearing that the rocks would penetrate the roof. He covered himself with a futon, a thin Japanese mattress, for protection.

"Even small eruptions can cause major damage if people are around, as they get hit by rocks that come flying," Nagoya University volcanologist Koshun Yamaoka said at a news conference Sunday.

Volcanoes can also kill by spewing [toxic gases](#) and lung-choking [ash](#).

Shinichi Shimohara, who works at a shrine at the foot of the mountain, said he was on his way up Saturday morning when he heard a loud noise that sounded like strong winds followed by "thunder" as the volcano erupted.

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