

Japan police: Volcanic rocks killed most victims

October 2 2014, by Mari Yamaguchi



Rescuers conduct a search operation near the peak of ash-covered Mount Ontake in central Japan, Thursday, Oct. 2, 2014. Saturday's eruption on Mount Ontake was the worst fatal eruption in postwar history in Japan. (AP Photo/Kyodo News) JAPAN OUT, MANDATORY CREDIT

Doctors have determined that almost all of the dozens of people killed on a Japanese volcano died of injuries from being hit by rocks that flew out during its eruption, police said Thursday.

Rescuers have retrieved 47 bodies from the ash-covered summit area of Mount Ontake since Saturday's eruption.

Doctors concluded that all but one of the bodies showed signs of having been hit by volcanic boulders and rocks, Nagano prefectural police said. The other victim died of burns from inhaling hot air.

Those hit by the rocks and debris had multiple cuts and fractures, particularly in the head and the back, as well as the legs, a prefectural police official said on condition of anonymity, citing department policy. Nagano police had earlier said the victims died of "disaster," without specifying the cause.

Most of the bodies were found near Mount Ontake's summit, where many climbers were resting or having lunch. Some bodies were retrieved from a trail at a slightly lower elevation.

Experts say hikers near the summit might have been hit by rocks flying as fast as 300 kilometers (190 miles) per hour. Most of the ash fell in the first hour of the explosion, according to the University of Tokyo's Earthquake Research Institute.

Survivors said they fled for their lives as rocks and debris rained down on them while they struggled with hot air and ash hitting their face.

Medical experts who have examined some of the nearly 70 injured have said most had bruises, cuts and bone fractures on their back, an apparent sign they were hit by rocks flying out of the volcano. Some of the injured reportedly had damage to their lungs and other organs due to the impact of rocks hitting them.



Rescuers, center, climb Mount Ontake covered by volcanic smoke and clouds for a search operation in central Japan, Thursday, Oct. 2, 2014. Saturday's eruption on Mount Ontake was the worst fatal eruption in postwar history in Japan. (AP Photo/Kyodo News) JAPAN OUT, MANDATORY CREDIT

The eruption at Mount Ontake, located in central Japan, caught hikers by surprise. Seismologists have said that increased seismic activity had been detected at Ontake, one of 47 active volcanoes in Japan that are under 24-hour monitoring, but that nothing signaled such a big eruption.

The search for more bodies continued Thursday, but ended early due to bad weather and concerns about toxic gases. Authorities are looking into the possibility that about 20 people caught in the eruption are still missing.

The death toll is the highest from a volcanic eruption in Japan's postwar

history, exceeding the 43 people killed in the 1991 eruption of Mount Unzen in southern Japan.



In this Wednesday, Oct. 1, 2014 photo released by Nagoya City Fire Dept., Nagoya City firefighters conduct a search operation near the peak of Mount Ontake in central Japan. Saturday's eruption on Mount Ontake was the worst fatal eruption in postwar history in Japan. (AP Photo/Nagoya City Fire Dept.)
MANDATORY CREDIT



In this Oct. 1, 2014 photo, rescuers walk in line after their search operation near the peak of Mount Ontake in central Japan. Saturday's eruption on Mount Ontake was the worst fatal eruption in postwar history in Japan. (AP Photo/Mainichi Shimbun, Kimi Takeuchi) MANDATORY CREDIT, JAPAN OUT, NO SALES,



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