

# Skiers injured by flying rocks on Japanese volcano

January 23 2018, by Mari Yamaguchi

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Ashes from Mount Kusatsu-Shirane cover near its summit after its eruption in Kusatsu, Gunma prefecture, central Japan, Tuesday, Jan. 23, 2018. A disaster official said the volcano erupted and caused avalanche near the ski resort. (Suo Takekuma/Kyodo News via AP)

Twelve people, including eight soldiers, skiing on the slopes of a volcano near a famous hot spring resort in central Japan were injured Tuesday by

flying rocks during a sudden eruption, officials said. One soldier later died.

The eruption quickly darkened the ski slope at Mount Kusatsu-Shirane with black ash, as volcanic rocks rained down on gondolas and people skiing down the slopes, sending them desperately seeking shelter at a mountaintop station.

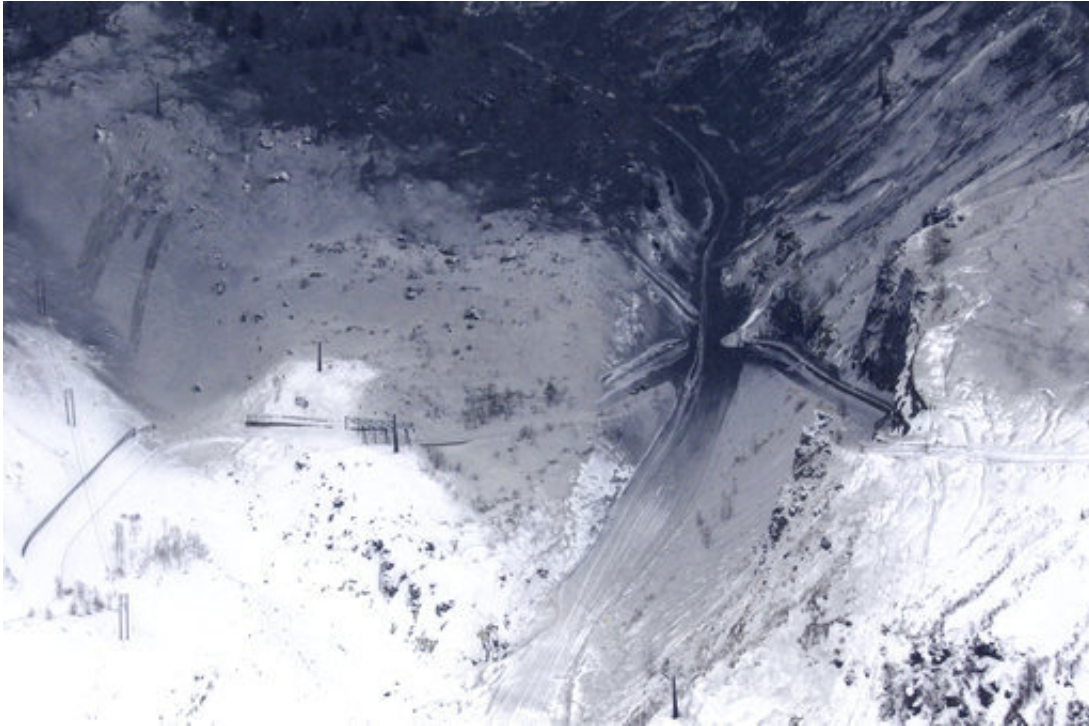
The eight soldiers were in a group of 30 who were undergoing ski training when they were hit by the volcanic rocks, defense officials said.

The officials had originally said the injuries were caused by an avalanche, but later corrected that account.

The four civilian skiers did not have life-threatening injuries, Gunma prefectural disaster officials said.

Only the crater had been off-limits because of low-level volcanic activity before Mount Kusatsu-Shirane erupted around 10 a.m. The Japan Meteorological Agency has since banned access to the mountain.

The agency said the eruption and avalanche could not be linked immediately. Snow conditions and seismic activity are some of the possible causes of an avalanche. The eruption occurred in an area considered less at threat from volcanic activity, and officials were caught off guard, agency official Makoto Saito told reporters. No warning had been issued to visitors.



Volcanic ashes cover the slopes of a ski resort in Kusatsu, Gunma prefecture, central Japan, after Mount Kusatsu-Shirane erupted Tuesday, Jan. 23, 2018. A disaster official said the volcano erupted and caused avalanche near the ski resort. (Suo Takekuma/Kyodo News via AP)

Defense Minister Itsunori Onodera said five of the eight soldiers were seriously injured. One of them, a 49-year-old male soldier, later died, said Wataru Tatsukawa, an official at the regional military training camp.

Onodera said the training was for rescue operations in the snow, and it was regrettable that those who were supposed to help had to be rescued.

Town officials said everyone on the mountain had been accounted for, and all of about 80 skiers who took refuge at a gondola station at the top of the ski slope were brought down to the foot of the mountain, some by a military helicopter, others by snowmobiles. The rescue operation was

finished by the evening.

NHK public television showed the first group of rescued skiers, wearing helmets, being handed a bottle of tea each and escorted into a cabin.

"I was scared to death, and I'm so relieved to come back alive," an unidentified male skier told NHK, still wearing a helmet. He said he was inside a gondola with two of his friends when the volcano erupted.

"Volcanic rocks rained down on the roof of the gondola. It shook so violently that I was afraid the whole thing might smash down on the ground."

Other skiers said rocks as big as lunch boxes rained down.



Fire trucks and ambulances are parked at a ski resort in Kusatsu, central Japan,

after Mount Kusatsu-Shirane erupted Tuesday, Jan. 23, 2018. A disaster official said the volcano erupted and caused avalanche near the ski resort. (Suo Takekuma/Kyodo News via AP)

An earlier report that some people had been injured by shattered glass when rocks struck a gondola had not been confirmed.

A rest house at the resort was hit by volcanic rocks, but the extent of damage was not known, resort official Yasuaki Morita said.

Kusatsu-Shirane last erupted in 1983. The area is known for Kusatsu Onsen, a famous hot spring resort. Kusatsu town officials said the impact of volcanic eruption was apparently limited to the ski resort, with no ash or volcanic rocks detected in the town, about 5 kilometers (3 miles) from the volcano.

Japan sits on the Pacific "Ring of Fire" and is prone to earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. An eruption of Mount Ontake in 2014 killed about 60 people. Several other Japanese volcanos are considered unstable and have had small eruptions in recent years.

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Citation: Skiers injured by flying rocks on Japanese volcano (2018, January 23) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-01-skiers-avalanche-japan-volcano.html>

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