

Slow Start

Quake exposes government's weak leadership, petty bureaucratic turf wars and lack of crisis management

By TAKAHIKO UEDA

Since the Jan. 17 Great Hanshin Earthquake, heavy criticism has mounted both at home and abroad that Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama's government exacerbated the disaster by failing to adequately deal with the crisis.

The massive death toll and property damage could have been reduced substantially if the government had been more prompt in launching search-and-rescue and firefighting operations involving large numbers of Self-Defense Forces members, and if traffic had been better controlled to allow in emergency vehicles, critics contend.

Many emergency vehicles were caught in huge traffic jams involving private automobiles.

Former Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu, head of the opposition party Shinshintō (New Frontier Party), lashed out in the Diet at the Socialist prime minister for lacking the leadership to coordinate disaster-relief missions.

The Murayama Cabinet failed to fulfill a minimum responsibility of protecting people's lives and property, Kaifu said.

But when Kaifu was prime minister in 1990, he, too, was widely criticized for being slow to respond to the international crisis triggered by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

While the two crises differ, time has apparently failed to correct what is seen as weak leadership, bureaucratic turf wars, an absence of centralized coordination, a shortage of information and consequent government procrastination, which critics claim constitute the sorry state of the nation's crisis-management system.

"Due to the government's incompetent crisis management, not only the lives of many people were lost but also the international community's trust in Japan has evaporated, because the prevalent myth



Emergency airlift KYODO