

abroad that Japan's administrative system is efficient is now completely shattered," said Satoshi Morimoto, a senior researcher at Nomura Research Institute.

"It is obvious that the nation has not learned how to effectively cope with national emergencies, despite a series of natural disasters such as earthquakes and typhoons, and the Gulf War," said Morimoto, who as a diplomat witnessed first-hand the Kaifu government's attempt at crisis management.

Murayama admitted the government blundered in its response to the quake, as he told the Diet on Jan. 20 that because the disaster was his first such experience and because the temblor struck early in the morning, there may have been confusion. He later stated that the confusion was with local authorities, not with the central government.

Officials said the government's main mistake was that it failed to grasp in the initial hours the full extent of the quake damage.

"Nobody imagined that such a devastating quake could strike the Kansai region," a high-ranking official said, indicating the government was caught completely off guard.

Murayama and Chief Cabinet Secretary Kozo Igarashi first learned of the temblor from television. Although Murayama was briefed by his secretary almost two hours after the quake that "the damage seems quite serious and extensive," subsequent reports were slow and fragmentary in the next few critical hours.

"The government made a critical mistake in the most basic and important aspect of crisis control by failing to estimate the human and material damage in the early hours. Because it must have assumed the damage was not very serious, further responses were hindered at every step," said Koichi Oizumi, a professor on crisis management at Nihon University.

The government's information system — collection, analysis, assessment and dissemination — is not organized adequately to deal with large-scale emergencies, he said.

Information on natural disasters collected by local authorities, police, firefighters and the SDF is not directly reported to the Prime Minister's Official Residence under the current system.

Instead, it flows to the National Land

Agency, which on paper is tasked with supervising and coordinating government rescue operations in natural disasters.

Not knowing the extent of the damage, the prime minister and top officials at first seemed to let the agency take the initiative in the quake response, despite the agency not having its own information-gathering network or authority to issue instructions to other organizations, including police and the SDF.

The agency's Disaster Prevention Bureau, which is primarily responsible for relief, is the smallest bureau in terms of personnel, with only 36 staffers. Many of the agency's officials are also on loan from other ministries, such as Finance and Construction.

The agency said it failed to grasp the magnitude of the disaster because telephone lines in the Kobe area were disrupted, making it difficult to contact prefectural authorities, and because those officials themselves suffered in the quake. The agency's disaster prevention wireless network does not have a linkup with prefectural authorities.

Agency chief Kiyoshi Ozawa was dispatched to the area and returned to Tokyo to report to Murayama on his on-the-spot check almost 36 hours after the quake. The death toll had topped 2,000 by that time.

Bureaucratic rigidity was also blamed for the slow government response, including critical delays in responding to international aid offers.

Before accepting a specially trained tracker-dog team from Switzerland, the Health and Welfare Ministry reportedly insisted the animals be quarantined for a certain time as generally required. Although this was later retracted, the team's arrival was substantially delayed.

Morimoto of Nomura Institute said such ugly aspects of bureaucratic sectionalism and red tape are often exposed in emergencies, because under the current decision-making system, the prime minister has enormous difficulty centralizing power by usurping the role of competing ministries.

"Because there are no established procedures or manuals stipulating who decides what in times of crisis, and since no organization plays a strong coordinating role, each ministry or agency takes its own

initiative, throwing bureaucratic action into disarray," Morimoto said.

There is also no effective system to follow up on orders, as demonstrated by the fact that many survivors in shelters did not know for a long time what relief measures the central and local governments had taken, he said.

Some critics say the Social Democratic Party of Japan's traditional hostility toward the SDF delayed the dispatch of rescuers.

It has often been said that prefectural and municipal worker unions, which have strong SDPJ connections, don't like cooperating with the SDF in disaster drills.

Although Igarashi has dismissed this as ridiculous, some senior Liberal Democrat

