



Self-Defense Force rescuers search for survivors KYODO

Caught off Guard

Insufficient planning, outdated information-gathering system leads to delay, confusion in the SDF's rescue operation

By REIJI YOSHIDA

The Great Hanshin Earthquake has revealed apparent shortcomings in the information-gathering system of the Self-Defense Forces.

According to many SDF officials, the forces relied on TV updates for information in the initial stages of the disaster.

Unless the system is improved, the delay and confusion in relief activities will be repeated the next time a major earthquake hits, some SDF officials said.

Lt. Gen. Yusuke Matsushima, who directed the rescue operations of the Ground Self-Defense Force, said he called up all available ground troops at around 3 a.m. on Jan. 18. — more than 21 hours after the

earthquake hit the Hanshin area.

"No information was available earlier to make me decide to call up all of the army troops," Matsushima, commander of the Chubu District Army Headquarters, told a Jan. 26 news conference.

The first 48 hours of a disaster are considered crucial for rescue operations.

The SDF, which by the beginning of February had its 16,000 troops mobilized, utilized only 2,300 on the first day and 9,500 as of 6 a.m. on Jan. 19, about 48 hours after the quake, according to the Defense Agency.

Although the SDF dispatched helicopters shortly after the quake, their observations did not yield much information on the

degree of damage, SDF officials said.

If anyone had accurate information on how serious the disaster was, it was the local police, Matsushima said.

But information did not flow in a smooth, orderly manner from police because of the SDF's lack of drills and experience in cooperating with police and local governments, he said.

By the evening of the first day, as the police-confirmed death toll continued to rise sharply, Matsushima began to realize the gravity of the disaster. The number of deaths, which stood at 337 at 1 p.m., topped 1,000 by 5:45 p.m.

"If we are unable to immediately recognize how serious a disaster is, the same