

Industry in Ruins

Kobe's locally fostered businesses suffer heaviest blow since World War II, but many vow to rebuild from scratch, regardless of how long it takes

By TETSUSHI KAJIMOTO

Rubble and gutted buildings stretch south of JR Shin-Nagata Station in Nagata Ward, Kobe, one of the most devastated areas from the Jan. 17. earthquake

More than 1,600 manufacturers of synthetic shoes and their affiliates were clustered in the densely populated area, which, before the quake, accounted for nearly 10 percent of the nation's general shoe market. At more than ¥80 billion in annual output, it was one of the city's largest industries.

But nearly 90 percent of these businesses were destroyed by the quake and subse-

quent fires, and the industry suffered damage estimated at a minimum of ¥350 billion, a spokesman for the Japan Chemical Shoes Association said.

"This will definitely affect the industry nationwide," he said, noting that the area accommodated about 80 percent of the country's entire manufacturers of such shoes and more than 70 percent of the shipments nationwide.

"A number of wholesale dealers and retailers throughout the country handling (synthetic) shoes may have to give up the business because of the destruction," he said.

Among many other Kobe specialties,

synthetic shoes had their origins here in the early 1950s.

The shoes are made from synthetic fiber, resin, leather and rubber — a design that replaced traditional rubber-soled cloth footwear shortly after World War II. Kobe was chosen as an ideal location for the industry, with its port for importing raw rubber materials and exporting the finished products, a city official said.

The area's industry had its heyday in the early 1990s, due to government measures to boost domestic demand a few years earlier, producing about 50 million pairs annually, worth more than ¥85 billion.

"It took decades to get to where we were. I have no idea when we can rebuild the industry," the spokesman said.

Although the association's office on the top floor of a five-story building is one of the few complexes that survived the quake in the area south of JR Shin-Nagata Station, the office was heavily damaged, with some of its windows broken and interior walls torn apart.

Notices urging employees to make known their whereabouts and conditions were everywhere in the rubble of the devastated business complex.

One asked, "Is everybody OK?" Another said, "Please contact your boss at this number."

"Most of the workers of companies around here lived in this area. Many of them haven't shown up for work since the quake, because they are busy taking care of their families and their houses," said Kosuke Miki, chairman of the Kobe Shoes Circle Cooperative Association.

David Shoes Co., which makes women's footwear, said its facilities were burned



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