

No Response

*Japanese government
slow to accept offers of
help from other countries*

Japan's response to foreign offers for help in the days following the Great Hanshin Earthquake generated tremendous criticism throughout the country and raised questions over whether the government handled the proposals in the most efficient way.

As the death toll mounted hourly, foreign embassy officials in Tokyo waited patiently for the green light to send rescue teams to the Hanshin region.

By Jan. 20, 29 countries and two international organizations had offered assistance for relief operations or reconstruction efforts. By Jan. 27, more than 50 nations and international organizations had offered emergency aid for the quake-devastated areas.

The Japanese government, however,

initially accepted help only from the United States, which provided blankets and dispatched a team to help in the reconstruction, and then Switzerland, which helped in the search for victims with a team equipped with 12 rescue dogs.

Even in the case of Switzerland, critics say that more people could have been found alive and rescued had the government accepted the assistance of the Swiss rescue team immediately after the offer was made.

Hours after the quake hit, France also offered the services of a 60-member disaster rescue team equipped with four tracker dogs. Having virtually been turned down and learning that the number of victims was increasing, it re-extended the offer,

which was finally accepted on the evening of Jan. 20, three full days after the quake.

Many other countries' offers of help in the initial rescue efforts were either turned down or ignored.

"It seems the Japanese government is not organized in receiving and accepting offers," one foreign embassy official said on Day 4, adding that there should be a section of officials in charge of handling proposals and assistance from overseas.

Another embassy official expressed his belief that the number of victims may have been less



A Swiss rescuer and his dog KYODO

if Tokyo had accepted rescue teams earlier.

"We are ready to send specialists with tents and food. We are not asking Japan to prepare accommodations. It is an emergency, rescue comes first," he said.

The delay in granting permission to foreign rescue teams seems largely attributable to confusion within relevant ministries and local governments, which left them unable to promptly identify what was needed and to prepare to receive foreign assistance. "After the temblor, information from the quake-hit area was confusing, and we (the government) were unable to immediately judge whether we needed foreign assistance," a Foreign Ministry official said.

Private relief volunteers from abroad also faced massive bureaucratic hurdles in their efforts to provide assistance.

One team of U.S. medical specialists, including many with experience in the 1994 Northridge earthquake in California, finally began providing medical aid on Jan. 23 after battling through red tape for days, only to be accepted as "unofficial aid." The group, which included eight doctors, 11 nurses and a paramedic, worked at two temporary shelters and three hospitals in Kobe on Jan. 23 and Jan. 24.



French rescuers inspect the debris of a building KYODO