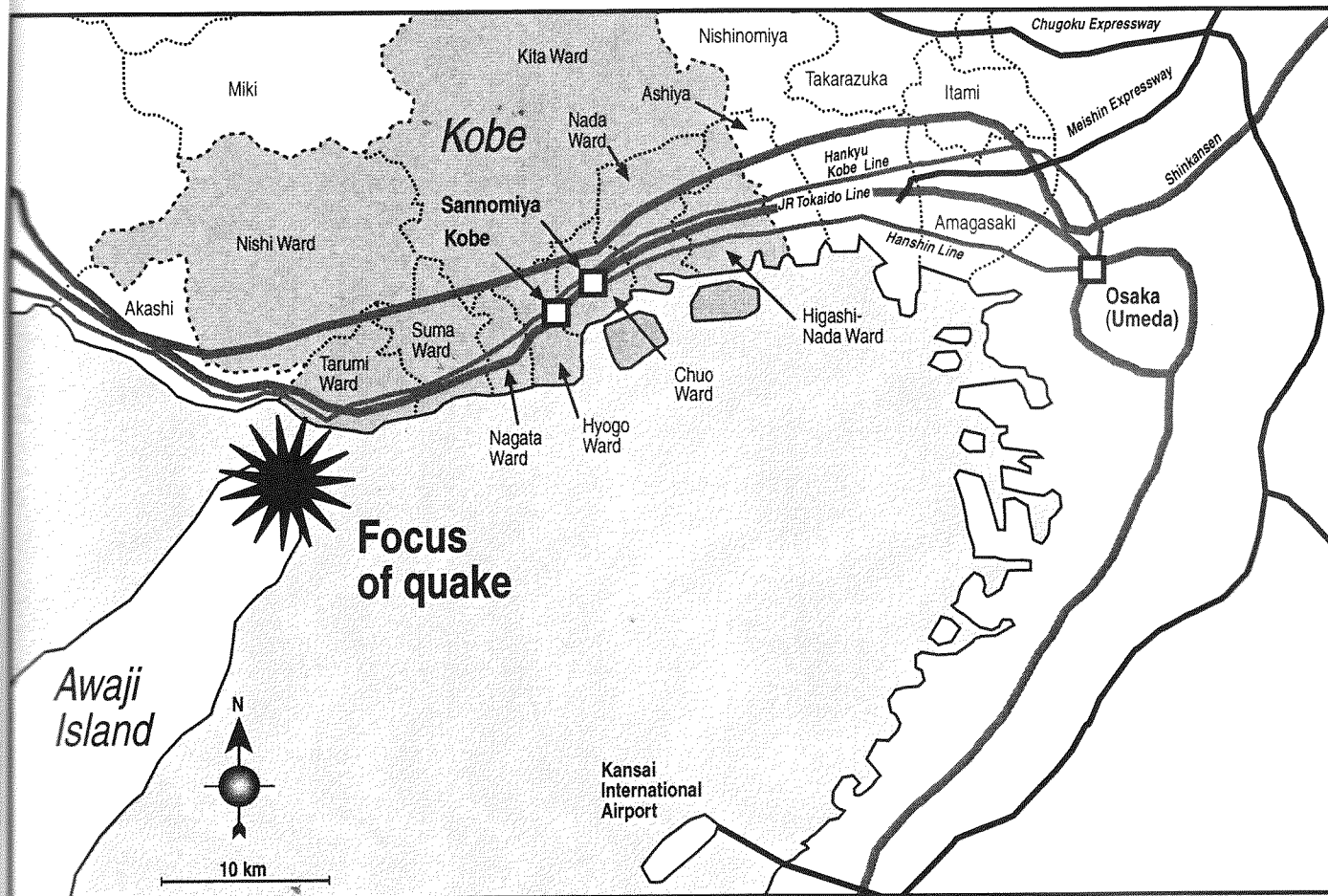




Urban Shock

20 short seconds changed forever the lives of hundreds of thousands in one of the world's biggest port cities

By MASARU FUJIMOTO

Few will ever forget. Not even those who lived elsewhere are likely to forget for decades what happened to Kobe and its surrounding areas at 5:46 a.m. on Jan. 17, 1995. No other event in 20th century Japan, save for the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 and World War II, claimed so many lives and shattered so many hopes in so few seconds.

Here in Japan and around the world, leading broadcasters, newspapers and magazines provided intensive coverage of the predawn quake on Day 1 and in the days that followed.

Registering magnitude 7.2 on the Richter scale, the quake was focused about 20 km under the northern tip of Awaji Island.

Even for a nation accustomed to ground movement, situated as it is at the intersection of four tectonic plates, the quake caught the residents of the Kansai region off guard. They had almost forgotten the major temblor of 1946 focused off Wakayama Prefecture that claimed 1,330 lives. The Jan. 17 quake was the first killer temblor in modern Japan to strike one of the country's (and the world's) largest port cities.

NHK and other television networks aired continuous live aerial views of the burning cities and towns, of collapsed elevated expressways that authorities had assured would be safe in a temblor of the strength of the Great Kanto Earthquake, and of people crying for help to remove the

rudder under which their loved ones were buried alive.

Those in secure areas who woke up to the otherworldly footage on television tried to call their relatives and friends in Kansai in a desperate bid to confirm their safety. Chances were slim of getting through, however, since telephone lines were either disrupted or overloaded with domestic and international calls.

Others were glued to their televisions. In the Kansai region, NHK's viewer ratings hit 50.4 percent at one point on the morning of Jan. 17. More than 76 percent of the population in Kanto and nearly 80 percent in Kansai watched the nonstop coverage of the quake during prime time between 7 and 10 p.m. that day when all networks