

Japan: Volunteers in earthquake-hit areas exceed 130,000

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More than 130,000 people have volunteered their time and energy to help with disaster relief in Iwate, Miyagi and Fukushima prefectures since the March 11 Great East Japan Earthquake, according to a Yomiuri Shimbun survey.

During the Golden Week holidays, the average number of volunteers working in the areas each day will likely triple to around 8,000, the survey showed.

Offers of help have been so numerous that some local governments have decided to temporarily stop accepting volunteers—partly because they were not prepared to handle the flood of people expected during the holiday period and also to prevent overcrowding and confusion on the roads.

Social welfare councils in the prefectures that coordinate volunteer activities have urged people to check beforehand on the conditions and needs in disaster-hit areas.

According to the disaster volunteer coordination office of the Cabinet Secretariat, each prefecture has a volunteer center, as do 66 municipalities. In Iwate Prefecture, there are 20 municipal centers. Miyagi Prefecture has 17, and Fukushima Prefecture has 29.

The city government of Ishinomaki, Miyagi Prefecture, has decided not to accept new individual volunteers during Golden Week. There are more than 1,000 volunteers active in the city each day—the largest number in the prefecture—and the city government said they have more than enough help.

Ishinomaki Senshu University has served as the city's volunteer reception center since March 15. Currently, more than 1,000 people are staying in tents or cars near the center.

The city government was spooked by the prospect of a huge surge in volunteers. Anticipating more than 2,000 people could inundate Ishinomaki during Golden Week, the city government worried whether it would be able to organize them all.

The city government of Kesennuma, Miyagi Prefecture, has also decided not to accept new volunteers from April 27 to May 8 because of a shortage of accommodations. Takekiyo Yoshida, senior director of the city's social welfare council, said: "There are still a lot of people that need the help volunteers can give. I hope people will still be willing to come at other times."

The city government of Iwanuma in the prefecture, on the other hand, was still accepting new volunteers. Municipal governments in coastal Iwate Prefecture also continued to accept volunteers, but the government of Otsuchicho was only taking groups of five or more ahead of the expected Golden Week surge.

But in Minami-Soma, Fukushima Prefecture—close to the nuclear crisis at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant—volunteers are in very short supply. After a stay-indoors advisory was lifted in parts of the town, requests from residents for help with removing rubble have increased, and there are not

enough hands for the job. So far, about 100 volunteers have worked in the town, but a disaster-relief volunteer center official said, "We expect the number to grow to 300 or so during Golden Week."

Of the 29 municipal volunteer centers in the prefecture, nine are actively seeking new volunteers, mainly in coastal areas hit by the tsunami.

Kiyomi Tsujimoto, a government adviser to the prime minister in charge of volunteer activities, said at a press conference Thursday there were 415 groups and organizations contributing to the volunteer effort. She said the government will continue to allow certified volunteers to drive on expressways free of charge. But she asked people to refrain from using their own cars when going to disaster-hit areas to volunteer.

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