

SEARCH FOR SURVIVORS AFTER DEADLY JAPAN EARTHQUAKE

AFTERSHOCKS RATTLE SOUTHWESTERN ISLAND

MASHIKI, Japan: Shaken residents of a southern Japanese island rocked by a powerful earthquake that left at least nine dead queued for water in rubble-strewn streets yesterday, with many facing a second night of uncertainty away from their ruined homes. Rescuers continued to search through damaged buildings for possible survivors after the violent quake that also injured hundreds, although officials said the death toll was unlikely to rise significantly.

Tens of thousands of people fled their homes after the 6.5-magnitude quake struck the southwestern island of Kyushu on Thursday night, leaving lumps of concrete strewn in the streets.

Houses collapsed, factories stopped work and a high-speed train was derailed, while the roof of the treasured Kumamoto castle in the southern city of the same name was also damaged. "We tried our best to take all our belongings and go to a shelter

by car," said Haruki Ito, 62, whose house tilted 45 degrees after the quake. "Our dogs got so scared and hid themselves inside the collapsed house," he told AFP, adding he hoped he and his wife could stay in a local shelter with their pets.

Dozens of aftershocks followed the quake, which hit about 9:26 pm (1226 GMT) on Thursday evening, and officials warned the death toll could still rise as rescuers scoured the collapsed structures. As rescue workers toiled through the night hours after the quake struck, an eight-month-old baby girl was pulled from the rubble alive and unharmed. "As far as we can tell from infrared images from a police helicopter, there appears to be a significant number of houses destroyed or half-collapsed," said disaster minister Taro Kono.

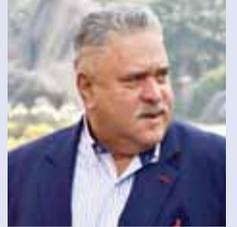
Rescuers were concentrating their searches in Mashiki, near the epicentre of the quake where eight of the nine deaths occurred. On the streets, the remains of collapsed Japanese-style houses - many of them aged, wooden structures - could be seen, and damaged roof tiles lay in piles. A rescue team with several search dogs patrolled around half-collapsed houses in the town but no new deaths had been announced for more than 14 hours. Scores of people spent the night huddled in front of Mashiki's town hall, some in tears, while others wrapped themselves in blankets to ward off the night chill. — AFP



MASHIKI, Japan: An aerial view shows construction workers restoring a damaged road beside a graveyard in this town in Kumamoto prefecture yesterday. — AFP

INDIA THREATENS TO REVOKE PASSPORT OF EMBATTLED TYCOON

MUMBAI: India yesterday said it had suspended the diplomatic passport of embattled tycoon and lawmaker Vijay Mallya, who left the country last month amid pressure from lenders to repay about \$1.4 billion in debt owed by his defunct Kingfisher Airlines. Mallya's case takes centre stage at a time when India's government and central bank have begun to crack down on bank loan defaulters, in a drive to clean up ailing state-run banks.



Vijay Mallya

Just days after Prime Minister Narendra Modi said no one "looting" money from banks would be spared, India's foreign ministry gave Mallya a week to answer why his passport should not be impounded or revoked. "If he fails to respond within the stipulated time, it will be assumed that he has no response to offer and the foreign ministry will go ahead with the revocation," ministry spokesman Vikas Swarup said in a statement on Twitter. The suspension is effective for four weeks, Swarup said, adding that the ministry acted on a request from the Enforcement Directorate, a government agency investigating financial crime. It was not immediately clear what the suspension means for Mallya, whose lawyer, C S Vaidyanathan, said he was not aware of the government notice and could not comment. A spokesman for Mallya's UB Group did not immediately respond to calls seeking comment.

Mallya, a member of the upper house of India's parliament who co-owns Britain-based motor racing team Force India, has not revealed his whereabouts since his departure on March 2, but has said he was not an absconder. The creditor banks this month rejected an offer of partial repayment by Mallya, who had given a personal guarantee for the Kingfisher loan, and have demanded that the former billionaire attend a hearing in India's Supreme Court. — Reuters

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