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Sunday, March 13, 2011

SDF in full disaster deployment; U.S. military pitches in

Kyodo News

The Self-Defense Forces swung into full action Saturday, less than 24 hours after the most powerful earthquake in the nation's recorded history caused devastating tsunami in northeastern Japan.

All available SDF resources, including personnel, vehicles, aircraft and vessels, were mobilized for rescue and other efforts in areas hit by the quake and tsunami.

At a meeting of the government's antidisaster countermeasure headquarters, Prime Minister Naoto Kan said the government would increase the number of SDF personnel detailed for rescue efforts to about 50,000.

Some 190 aircraft and about 25 vessels were dispatched or were preparing for deployment as of Saturday afternoon, according to the Defense Ministry.

"I want you to continue doing everything in your power" to deal with the relief efforts, Defense Minister Toshimi Kitazawa said at a meeting involving senior civilian officials and SDF officers.

He said other Cabinet ministers praised the SDF's initial response, noting that efforts to rescue stranded people in the Tohoku region were being executed "efficiently."

The SDF was arranging with the U.S. military to transport about 900 Ground Self-Defense Force troops and about 250 vehicles by U.S. vessels in what would be Japan's largest-ever antidisaster operation involving U.S. forces, the ministry said.

The Maritime Self-Defense Force and the U.S. 7th Fleet geared up to conduct joint search and rescue operations off the Pacific coast.

Of the roughly 20,000 SDF personnel moved or being moved, about 11,000 come from different parts of the country, including Hokkaido and Fukuoka, the ministry said.

SDF liaison officers have been sent to Hokkaido, Miyagi, Iwate, Akita, Aomori, Fukushima and Yamagata prefectures to coordinate with local officials.

MSDF helicopters were trying to rescue about 80 people stranded on a ship near Ishinomaki, Miyagi Prefecture, while GSDF helicopters were airlifting people from an elementary school in Watari, also in Miyagi, early Saturday, the Defense Ministry said.

GSDF personnel arrived at a location near the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant in Fukushima Prefecture before dawn to measure radiation levels in cooperation with experts.

USS Reagan on way

WASHINGTON (Kyodo) At Tokyo's request, the U.S. Defense Department stepped up efforts Friday to help Japan cope with the aftermath of Friday's devastating earthquake by sending the aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan

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"We will do all, anything we are asked to do to help out," Defense Secretary Robert Gates said in a statement.

The U.S. Navy said six ships, including the Ronald Reagan, will be involved in the quake relief mission. These include the amphibious ship USS Tortuga, stationed in Sasebo, Nagasaki Prefecture.

The amphibian helicopter carrier USS Blue Ridge, now in Singapore, was loading humanitarian assistance and disaster relief items to prepare for departure Saturday morning, a Pentagon official said.

The Pentagon also revealed that U.S. forces in Japan have already allowed about 10 civilian aircraft diverted from Narita International Airport to land at Yokota Air Base in western Tokyo.

Separately, the U.S. Agency for International Development announced it will send two rescue teams, each consisting of around 70 members and rescue dogs, to Japan.

The rescue teams will also deliver 150 tons of relief goods to quake-hit areas, the agency added.

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