

Experts urge rethink of disaster response measures as Japan battles coronavirus

As Japan struggles to get a handle on the coronavirus, disaster response experts have urged governments nationwide to refurbish evacuation centers and beef up emergency measures so they can better respond in the event of natural and other disasters — especially during pandemics.

“Complex disasters are an imminent threat so we are asking you to start making every possible preparation to prevent and reduce the damage caused by such events,” Masako Yoneda, director of Japan Academic Network for Disaster Reduction, said Friday in an online statement.

“Torrential rains are becoming more frequent in Japan due to global warming ... and large parts of Japan saw floods that triggered landslides in recent years,” she said. “Evacuation shelters are usually set up when a disaster occurs, but with the looming threat of COVID-19 infections, it’s essential to rethink evacuation methods.”

In a video message released Friday, Yoneda suggested establishing additional facilities that would serve as evacuation centers able to handle COVID-19 patients and adopting stricter ventilation and disinfection strategies to prevent infections. She also urged governments to create dedicated areas in their evacuation centers to separate people with symptoms of the disease from those who appear to be healthy.

To improve the conditions at evacuation centers, the Cabinet Office recommends using cots. But in times of disaster, it is often the case that evacuees must sleep side by side in places like school gyms without partitions.

The earthquakes and floods that hit western Japan in 2018, as well as a pair of strong typhoons that crossed the country the following year, exposed shortcomings in the state’s disaster-preparedness strategy.

The flooding of the Tama River caused by Typhoon Hagibis last October left widespread damage in Tokyo, Kanagawa and other prefectures, forcing some 176,500 people from 37 communities to flee. And this year, on March 11, torrential rain forced the evacuation of 2,410 residents in the town of Shibecha in eastern Hokkaido.

The Japan Academic Network for Disaster Reduction emphasized the need to use more classrooms in addition to gymnasiums to ensure evacuees maintain a safe social distance from one another.

Following the state of emergency declaration last month, the central government issued a notice to local governments recommending they set up new evacuation centers. It also recommended that evacuees take shelter at the homes of relatives to avoid overcrowding shelters and the risk of spreading the virus.



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