

# Kobe Earthquake

*In my essay I am trying to answer the question 'Why did so many people die in the Kobe earthquake?'*

*The great earthquake that measured 7.2 on the Richter scale, struck Kobe at 5.40pm on Tuesday 17<sup>th</sup> January, 1995, the earthquake only lasted 20 seconds; however a lot of damage was caused. Southern Japan, where Kobe was located, is the world's largest container port and is also a very rich country. It is very technology advanced and often the first country to manufacture the most modern products. The earthquake caused a lot of destruction in this part and was nearly completely destroyed. Kobe has not had a major earthquake since 1596.*

*Many people died because of their houses been so poorly built. Houses that were built before 1981 collapsed in the earthquake because the roofs were made of very heavy concrete tiles, and were wooden framed houses. These were very heavy so a lot of people would have died from suffocation, or from being crushed. These houses were not earthquake proof, so people that lived in these were in great danger. However, houses that were built after 1981, have been made earthquake proof, this means that they are adapted to earthquakes, have the latest technology and hopefully would not fall down whilst there is an earthquake. These houses would have been more recently built and made with stronger material.*

*A familiar story is of the Endo family, who Mr & Mrs Endo lived the older residential part of Kobe called Nishinomiya; most people who lived here were old. Older people were in more danger of death because in the older suburbs of Kobe, many elderly people lived there and owned older houses, such as the Endo's house which was built before 1960.*

*Mrs Endo was in her house at the time of the earthquake, whilst her husband, Mr Endo, visited their son and then stayed the night. The Endo's son, Kazuo, lives in a new apartment block in central Kobe. His building was built after 1981; therefore it would have been earthquake proof and built with stronger materials. Due to the fact that the Endo's house was built before 1981, the materials that were used to build it would have been weak and therefore would have collapsed during an earthquake. The Endo's house did collapse in the Kobe Earthquake, not forgetting that the roof of their house was made of very heavy concrete tiles. Mrs Endo was trapped under the rubble of her home and died of suffocation after a long, painful 36 hours. Like many people during the after shock of the earthquake trying to find their loved ones, Kazuo Endo tried searching for his mother with his bare hands for days, with the help of his friends, but later on the 19<sup>th</sup> January, he found her body.*

*By the end of the devastating earthquake, 23,600 were injured, 356,000 people were left homeless, and 5,000 people were dead. This damage was so great because Japan is so densely populated at about 310 people living there per square kilometre. Many sufferers also died from a lack of oxygen, starvation and being burnt from fires that occurred, although the majority of deaths were caused by fire storms. A large number of people were trapped under rubble for hours until they died of suffocation, but many*

volunteers made the effort to decrease that number by helping to find victims by searching with their bare hands. As 230,000 homes were left destroyed and a massive 849,500 people that lost electricity, which caused large areas of Kobe to black out, many people had to suffer and live in the cold. Surprisingly, these people were some of the lucky ones as a large amount of people didn't even have a home and had to go to their local school/ church/ community centre where more volunteers would help look after them. They had to go to a central building where there would be stockpiles of food, water and blankets. These were difficult conditions, and what made it even worse, was that it was January and as you can imagine, it was freezing cold, but another important matter was that diseases spread such as influenza. Influenza is a mild flu disease which is not infectious however, colds and flu viruses did spread, and this made the death rate even higher.

Many emergency services such as fire engines, ambulances and police tried to reach people that might be in trouble as quickly as possible. But, unfortunately this was difficult because some roads were blocked due to fire storms, flooding, aftershocks and gas pipes exploding. Due to these disadvantages of difficult access, it prevented the emergency services from responding very well, so more deaths happened. However, they might not have if it wasn't for the problem of access. The emergency services did try hard to get to the injured people quick, but arrived after several hours.

So many people died in the Kobe earthquake because no one knew it was going to happen and people were unprepared for it. Many homes in Japan were not earthquake-proof (built before 1981), leading to many deaths. The fact it was in the middle of January caused a big effect on the number of deaths. People died from freezing conditions and the outbreak of influenza and other diseases. It has been considered that the amount of deaths could have been reduced if it wasn't the fact that the earthquake was in the middle of freezing cold January, this made it difficult for the population of Kobe as homes were destroyed and people had nowhere to go so they would probably be sleeping in the freezing cold, this also caused hyperthermia which led to many deaths. If the earthquake hit in the summer, this would have possibly saved lives because people wouldn't have froze to death. In a sense, Kobe can count themselves lucky as they are an MEDC in an LEDC, the services would have not been able to come quickly in this emergency to help in a less developed and poorer country because people will have less communication and technology. Poorer countries are at a great disadvantage.

Overall, I think that the reason why so many people died in the Kobe Earthquake was because they weren't prepared for it. Emergency services couldn't get to people quick enough, and, most importantly, houses weren't earthquake proof. I also think that it is because the earthquake was in the middle of January when it would be icy and very cold. People had nowhere to go or to sleep, and at night it is the coldest so a large amount of people died of hyperthermia. However, Kobe has learnt to build stronger, earthquake-proof houses so that they will be prepared for earthquakes in the near future. They now know what to expect and what to do in the next earthquake, more than they did before.