

Second strong quake rocks south Japan

MASHIKI (JAPAN) – A powerful earthquake with a preliminary magnitude of 7.1 struck southern Japan early this morning, rattling nerves in an area where barely 24 hours earlier a smaller quake had killed at least nine people.

Japanese broadcaster NHK said a number of calls were coming in from residents reporting people being trapped inside houses and buildings, and rescue workers were scrambling to help.

The quake shook the Kumamoto region at 1.25am this morning and several aftershocks soon followed. Japan's Meteorological Agency issued an advisory for a tsunami up to 1 metre high along the coast west of the epicentre in Kumamoto, but the advisory was lifted less than an hour later.

Sirens of patrol vehicles were heard on the background as NHK reported from the hardest-hit town of Mashiki. The asphalt ground outside the town hall had a new crack, apparently made by the latest earthquake.

The Nuclear Regulation Authority said no abnormalities were found at the Sendai nuclear plant, where the only two of Japan's 43 operable reactors are online. NHK video showed that stones tumbled from the walls of historic Kumamoto Castle, and a wooden structure in the complex was smashing, adding to Thursday's damage at the site.



age at the site.

Thursday's weaker, magnitude 6.5 earthquake brought down buildings and injured about 800 people, in addition to the nine deaths. The epicentre of this morning's earthquake was about 12km northwest of Thursday's, and at a depth of about 10km this morning's quake was more shallow.

It hit residents who were still in shock from Thursday's horrors and had suffered through more than 100 aftershocks in the interim.

Yesterday, Mr Yuichiro Yoshikado described the horror of the earthquake striking as he was taking a bath in his Mashiki apartment.

An eight-month-old baby is carried away by rescue workers after being rescued from her collapsed home in Mashiki, Kumamoto prefecture, Japan.

PHOTO: REUTERS

"I grabbed onto the sides of the bathtub, but the water in the tub, it was about 70 per cent filled with water, was going like this," he said, waving his arms, "and all the water splashed out. It's as if all control was lost. I thought I was going to die and I couldn't bear it any longer."

A bright spot broadcast repeatedly on television yesterday was the overnight rescue of an apparently uninjured baby, wrapped in a blanket and carried out of the rubble of a collapsed home.

Police said yesterday that concern about aftershocks was keeping many people from starting the huge task of cleaning up. Since this morning's quake was bigger, Thursday's was technically a foreshock.

Mr Yoshikado, whose building was undamaged despite the intense shaking, checked the damage at his aunt and uncle's home nearby. Kitchenware was scattered on the floor, and a clock had stopped around 9.26pm, the time of the earthquake. Power and water have yet to be restored, and many in the neighbourhood have yet to return because of the aftershocks.

About 44,000 people stayed in shelters after Thursday's quake.

The dead included five women and four men, the Fire and Disaster Management Agency said. One man was in his 20s, and the rest of the victims ranged from their 50s to one woman in her 90s. Eight of the nine victims were from Mashiki.

There were varying reports on the number of injured. The government's

S'POREANS SAFE FROM THURSDAY'S QUAKE: MFA

● No Singaporeans were affected by the massive earthquake that struck Japan's south-western island of Kyushu on Thursday, said the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). It said the Singapore Embassy in Tokyo has contacted most of the registered Singaporeans in the affected areas.

"We have verified with the Japanese authorities that no Singaporeans were affected by the earthquake thus far. Our Embassy will continue to try and contact the remaining Singaporeans," said the MFA in a statement yesterday.

The MFA said Singaporeans in the affected areas who require consular assistance may contact the Singapore Embassy in Tokyo or the 24-hour MFA Duty Office.

The Embassy telephone number is (+81) 33586 9111/2 while the number of its duty officer is (+81) 90 3208 4122. The Embassy is also contactable via email at singemb_tyo@mfa.sg. Alternatively, Singaporeans can also contact the 24-hour MFA Duty Office at +65 6379 8800 / 8855 or mfa_duty_officer@mfa.gov.sg.

The MFA also extended its condolences to the families who lost their loved ones in the earthquake and wished the injured a speedy recovery.

"Singapore is saddened to hear that the earthquake centred in Kumamoto Prefecture in southern Japan had claimed a number of lives. We express our deepest condolences to the families who lost their loved ones and wish the injured speedy recovery," added the MFA.

chief spokesman, Yoshihide Suga, said at least 860 people had been injured, 53 seriously. Kumamoto prefecture tallied 784 injured.

Mr Suga said 1,600 soldiers had joined the relief and rescue efforts. TV reports showed troops delivering blankets and adult diapers to those in shelters. **AGENCIES**

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China growth slows, but stimulus measures gain traction

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"What this shows is a stabilisation of the old economy," said Mr Raymond Yeung, China economist at Australia and New Zealand Banking Group in Hong Kong, pointing to recovery in industrial production and fixed asset investment.

"I would still be a bit cautious about headline growth ... Last year's 6.9 per cent figure was underpinned by a massive contribution from financial services, and the strong loan and credit growth recently and the recent resumption of IPO (initial public offering) activity suggests this could still be a big contribution," he added.

Asian markets were subdued as the closely watched GDP data was right in line with forecasts. China's stocks eased slightly, with the Shanghai Composite Index closing down 0.1 per cent at 3,078.12 on speculation that the steady showing in March and a surge in new credit will prompt authorities to refrain from adding stimulus.

Stocks in Singapore rose modestly, with the Straits Times Index ending up 0.3 per cent at 2,923.94.

Beijing is hoping that a recovery

— even a credit-fuelled one — can be sustained to avoid the need for more aggressive stimulus that could reinflate asset bubbles and make it more difficult to retrain Chinese firms to move up the value chain.

Chinese banks extended 1.37 trillion yuan (S\$287 billion) in net new yuan loans last month, nearly double the previous month's lending of 726.6 billion yuan, suggesting renewed appetite for investment among wary Chinese companies.

China's retail sales growth quickened to 10.5 per cent year-on-year in March from 10.2 per cent previously, slightly above forecasts, while industrial output growth leapt to 6.8 per cent from 5.4 per cent, surprising analysts who expected a rise of 5.9 per cent. Fixed-asset investment growth rose to 10.7 per cent year-on-year in the first quarter from 10.2 per cent, while investment in real estate development rose 6.2 per cent.

The NBS also noted that unemployment remained low in March at about 5.2 per cent, despite moves to cut capacity in bloated industries such as coal and steel. **AGENCIES**

When it comes to innovation, the food industry has a winning recipe

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Singapore: Inside Out travelling showcase, which features the Republic's contemporary creative talents, it featured chocolate lollipops in flavours such as kaya and bak kwa, and was hung from a ceiling. She has also begun collaborating with French fashion houses to come up with chocolates, and has opened a factory along MacTaggart Road which makes a retail line of sweets.

Less than a decade after the economics graduate took the plunge to set up her eatery, she has made a name for herself: Last year, she was invited to be a guest chef for the reality TV cooking competition series MasterChef Australia, where contestants had to re-create her signature dessert, the Cassis Plum.

Innovation is a buzzword these days in Singapore, but few would associate food with it.

The fact is, however, that the industry is choc-a-block with many entrepreneurs like Ms Wong who are blazing a trail and making a mark for themselves – so much so that Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat held it up as a role model for innovation and overseas expansion during his recent Budget statement. It is one industry that appears poised to tap the spirit of enterprise which the Budget aims to encourage, with measures such as tax incentives and support for automation projects to help local firms to place a “stronger emphasis on technology adoption and innovation”, among other objectives.

TRAILBLAZERS

After Ms Wong finished her studies at the National University of Singapore, she had a three-month stint at the famed Le Cordon Bleu culinary school in Paris. Having seen how fashion labels use codes to develop their collections, her next big idea was to develop technology to paint her chocolates and replace the hand-painting process. “Our confectioneries have a strong relation to art and design. I'm slowly trying to change the way people think. Chocolates are almost always brown ... but why not make them fashionable?” said Ms Wong, who is selling the sweet treats to places around the world, including Hong Kong. “New ideas and new techniques equate to sustainability in the long run, that's my business model.”

Currently, hand-painting each mould takes 10 to 15 minutes, but by using a machine, the time could potentially be cut to 5 minutes. “We cannot meet the world's demands (without automation) ... I have only that number of chefs I can hire,” said Ms Wong, who has already assigned codes to her colours and brush strokes, and is looking for a partner to provide the machine.

Chef Daniel Tay is another who is pushing the boundaries in the food industry. The founder of Bakerzin sold the French-style bakery chain in 2007, but managed it until end-2013. Shortly

after starting food solutions and contract manufacturer Foodgnostic, the 46-year-old launched online gourmet cheesecake shop Cat and the Fiddle.

In January, he rolled out online confectionery Old Seng Choong, which took its name from his father's old bakery, Seng Choong Confectionery.

Mr Tay said he makes full use of technology to help his business along. For example, he uses a high-speed blender to mix his ingredients. The machine can mix 300 kg of ingredients in five minutes. Previously, it took 25 minutes to mix 60 kg. The end product is also more homogenous, which makes it “creamier and more palatable”, said Mr Tay.

He also has a cake-slicing machine which can cut a cheesecake in 10 seconds, compared to five minutes by hand. “In today's climate...technology is the only way to go. It's a simple equation, if you can't make it cheaper and better, then other people will...We need to always be ahead with technology,” he said.

Explaining why he sold Bakerzin and left his comfort zone, he said that increasing rentals were eating into profits. “Sales are no longer substantial enough to cover rentals,” he said.

HOW OLD BRANDS KEEP UP WITH THE TIMES

Homegrown coffee brand OWL International, which is marking its 60th anniversary this year, also saw the need to innovate despite its success, and has since grown from producing two basic coffee items to almost 300 individual product variants, including coffee, tea, cereal drinks and soybean curd mixes.

For decades, the company, which began as a family set-up, concentrated on roast and ground coffee, ignoring the growing trend of pre-mixed coffee, said Mr Richmond Te, 31, the company's group assistant general manager. As a result, sales dipped, and the company was acquired by Super Group in 2003.

Super Group kept the OWL brand for its rich heritage of roasting coffee. But it was not until 2010, when Mr Te joined the family business, that OWL began evolving. Mr Te, whose father Ronald is the executive director and co-founder of Super Group, said he was determined to refresh the brand's image.

“When I came in, OWL was very comfortable. That was the reason it started declining in the first place,” he said. “We cannot be comfortable with where we are. We need to constantly remind consumers that we are improving, we are moving forward, we are appealing to a younger group of customers.”

In 2012, the company launched a new logo and opened a café. It now runs four cafes, with one more – a flagship outlet in Chai Chee – slated to open before the third quarter of this year. In terms of product innovation, it is tapping on freeze-drying technol-



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We cannot meet the world's demands (without automation) ... I have only that number of chefs I can hire.

Ms Janice Wong (picture)
WHO OPENED DESSERT EATERY 2AM:DESSERT BAR IN 2007

ogy, which locks in the aroma of coffee beans, among other initiatives. The company also developed its single-serving capsule range last December, serving Straits Asian flavours branded with familiar names: Kopi-o, Kopi-o Gao, and Teh-o. “With the rise of specialty cafes and mega-coffee chains, people are upgrading themselves...so we have moved on with a much more premium offering,” Mr Te said.

Ms Li Li Hong, who co-founded Mr Popiah with her late husband Tan Kok Hoo, who died last year, also credited its automation for the business' expansion. For instance, it developed and custom-made a machine which can mimic the movements of the human hand. The result: A final product that resembles handmade popiah skins. It also has machines which can whip up sauces and ingredients, thus cutting manpower demands.

While workers can only roll out 100 popiah skins in an hour, a machine can produce 1,200 pieces, she noted.

Coming up with unique flavours is another selling point, said Ms Li, who is in her 40s. Besides the traditional popiah filled with turnip, it has added kimchi beef popiah, sushi popiah and ice cream popiah, among others, to the menu. Ms Li gets inspiration from travelling to trade shows overseas and observing the food culture there.

“I noticed that the younger generation and foreigners here don't like to eat the traditional popiah. I thought I

could draw them in with flavours that they are familiar with, so that I could hit every segment of the population with my products,” she said.

Ms Li and Mr Tan started out selling Western food, rojak and popiah from a stall in a coffeeshop at Bedok North in 1995. Soon after, they began experimenting with their popiah fillings, rolling out fish fillet and rojak popiah. Two years later, they opened a factory and began distributing their popiah skins and fillings to others. They closed the stall shortly after, as they found the wholesale business was more viable, but reopened it in 2014.

Currently, there are 11 stalls island-wide bearing the Mr Popiah brand, including nine franchisees. Mr Popiah also supplies popiah skins and ingredients to coffeeshops, food court stalls, restaurants and hotels.

But innovation is not always about automation.

Komala's Restaurants, for example, experimented with new dining concepts, to great success. The eatery chain's roots go back to 1947, when Komala Vilas - a restaurant in Serangoon Road owned by the late Mr Murugiah Rajoo - was set up, serving traditional south Indian vegetarian meals.

Mr Rajoo's son, Mr R T Sekar, joined the business at the age of 22 in 1981. In 1995, he realised that the restaurant needed to expand. However,

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