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9.30am update

Japan hit by powerful earthquake

- At least five killed and 400 injured
- Quake sparks fire at nuclear plant

Justin McCurry in Tokyo
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Damage caused by a powerful earthquake in the north-western Japanese town of Kashiwazaki. Photograph: Koji Sasahara/AP

At least five people died and more than 400 others were injured when a powerful earthquake struck the north-west coast of Japan this morning, sparking a blaze at the world's biggest nuclear power station and flattening dozens of buildings.

The quake, which measured 6.8 on the Richter scale, rocked towns in Niigata prefecture on the Japan Sea coast at 10.13am, triggering a tsunami warning that was later lifted, reports said.

Among the dead were two women in their 80s who were buried in the rubble of their homes. Hundreds of other people escaped with minor injuries, although there were fears that at least a dozen people were still trapped in their the ruins of older, wooden houses.

Nuclear power stations in the region shut down automatically during the earthquake, which also shook buildings in Tokyo more than 160 miles away.

Minutes later, a cloud of thick black smoke could be seen coming from Kashiwazaki nuclear plant, but the blaze, inside an electrical transformer, was quickly extinguished and there were no radiation leaks, Tokyo Electric Power said.

Gas supplies to about 35,000 homes were cut off as a precaution and 18,000 households were still without power early this afternoon.

The Meteorological Agency warned that strong aftershocks could continue to shake the area in the coming days.

The prime minister, Shinzo Abe, who was campaigning in southern Japan ahead of national elections on July 29, returned to Tokyo to oversee the rescue operation. "We need to take every step to save lives," he told reporters. "It's supposed to rain tomorrow in the area so we have to take every step to save lives, secure lifelines and reassure people."

The region had barely recovered from a major quake that struck in October 2004, killing more than 60 people and damaging more than 6,000 homes.

The death toll could have been much higher had the earthquake struck a few hours earlier when many households would have been using gas for cooking.

The quake also exposed the vulnerability of Tokyo in one of the world's most earthquake-prone countries, where tremors are recorded every few minutes. More than 140,000 people died in the last big earthquake to hit the capital, in 1923. Experts say Tokyo is due another powerful quake in the next 50 years.

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