

Magnitude 6.4 earthquake strikes southern Taiwan; at least 2 buildings collapse

Rong-Gong Lin II, Los Angeles Times, 2-5-16

A magnitude 6.4 earthquake struck southern Taiwan early Saturday, causing two buildings to fall in the city of Tainan, one of the island's oldest cities, according to local news reports.

The reports said one of the buildings that fell appears to be residential and was 17 stories tall. Rescue crews were pulling out survivors; hundreds were still reportedly trapped.

The quake, which hit at 3:57 a.m. Friday, was particularly bad because it was very shallow -- about six miles underground -- and the epicenter was on the island, instead of offshore, said U.S. Geological Survey geophysicist Paul Caruso. People felt the earthquake as far away as mainland China.

The quake hit a day before the eve of the Lunar New Year, a time of family celebrations.

Derek Hoerler, an elementary school teacher originally from California, said he woke up and felt violent shaking.

"It was not a rolling gentle earthquake, but a violent jerking motion. The walls were shaking and you could hear the building and windows moving," said Hoerler, who lives in New Taipei City and was visiting family in Kaohsiung when the quake hit. "It lasted at least a minute with swaying afterwards. I felt complete terror.

"Biggest earthquake I've felt, and I'm from California," said Hoerler, 37, who is originally from Santa Clara. "Now I just feel worried for the people in Tainan, where buildings collapsed."

Hoerler said he was in the Sacramento area when the magnitude 6.9 Loma Prieta earthquake hit the Bay Area in 1989 and thought that this temblor in Taiwan felt different.

"That was a rolling quake in '89," he said. "I remember seeing the pavement actually roll like a wave. The one in Taiwan felt like [the earth moved] up and down, side to side -- violent jerking, like someone was shaking you hard."

The epicenter of the earthquake was underneath the central mountain range of Taiwan -- about 27 miles southeast of Tainan and 24 miles northeast of Kaohsiung, the island's main port city.

The strongest earthquake to hit Taiwan in recent years was in 1999, when a magnitude 7.6 temblor hit the island's central region. About 2,500 people died in that quake.

Taiwan sits in a collision zone between the Philippine Sea and Eurasian plates, and is seismically active.