

Advancing Police Operations Based on the Response to the 2024 Noto Peninsula Earthquake

1 Introduction

The 2024 Noto Peninsula Earthquake, which struck in January 2024, caused extensive damage, particularly in the Noto region. Numerous buildings collapsed, and large-scale landslides and fires occurred, resulting in the loss of many lives. The Ishikawa Prefectural Police established a Disaster Security Headquarters led by the Chief of Police. Approximately 135,000 police officers and other personnel, including members of Police Disaster Response Units, were dispatched to Ishikawa Prefecture from across Japan. Police forces nationwide worked together as one, drawing on their combined capabilities to carry out a wide range of disaster security operations.

In April of the same year, the National Police Agency established a working group to enhance police operations in large-scale disasters. This group reviewed the police disaster security operations carried out during the initial response to the Noto Peninsula Earthquake, including information gathering and deployment of units, search-and-rescue operations, traffic control, criminal investigations, crime prevention measures, public communications related to police activities, and efforts to sustain police operations as the response became prolonged—and then compiled the lessons learned.

Looking ahead to future large-scale disasters, in order to ensure a rapid and appropriate police response, the police will, on a cross-organizational basis, carry out the initiatives compiled by the working group to enhance police operations in large-scale disasters. Meanwhile, the police will continuously review such initiatives and work to enhance disaster response capabilities. This topic introduces these initiatives.



Damage in the affected area



Activities of Inter-prefectural Emergency Rescue Units



Operations in snowy and cold conditions

MEMO

Interview with police officers in the field

Leader, Special Rescue Unit, Inter-prefectural Emergency Rescue Unit, Kanagawa Prefectural Police

In the Inter-prefectural Emergency Rescue Unit of the Kanagawa Prefectural Police, all members—from platoon leaders to individual officers—undergo rigorous training together to ensure that not a single second is wasted in rescuing victims and handing them over to medical institutions. The dispatch to Ishikawa Prefecture following the 2024 Noto Peninsula Earthquake put the results of this daily training to the test. My unit members and I carried out search operations in close coordination, working tirelessly to locate and rescue victims.

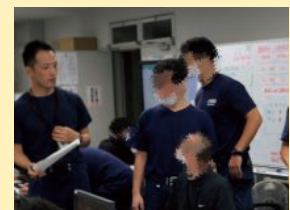
After the rescue activities, seeing the victims reunited with their families deeply moved me as I felt our unceasing day-and-night rescue efforts at the disaster sites had truly borne fruit.

We will continue to engage in a wide range of training to further enhance the disaster response capabilities of the Inter-prefectural Emergency Rescue Unit so that we can save as many lives as possible when a disaster strikes.

Kazuhiro Takehara, Assistant Director, Security Division, Ishikawa Prefectural Police

(Currently Deputy Director, Security Division, Ishikawa Prefectural Police)

Immediately after the earthquake, I was responsible for disaster response in the Security Division, so I rushed to the Disaster Security Headquarters established at the Prefectural Police Headquarters. Since the disaster struck on New Year's Day, the headquarters was not fully staffed. As personnel arrived, I assigned them tasks beyond their customary duties, including the collection of damage information, and issued instructions flexibly in response to the evolving situation. Following the earthquake, it took time to identify access routes to the affected areas, and power outages and water supply disruptions occurred at police facilities in the disaster zone, among other unexpected challenges. Amid these circumstances, police units from across the country rushed to the area by air. Watching them carry out rescue operations with unwavering determination around collapsed buildings and other hazardous sites, I was struck by the strength of the police organization as a whole.



2 Advancing police operations in large-scale disasters

(1) Information gathering and deployment of units during the initial response

In this disaster response, the police collected damage information using police aircraft; however, during the early stages, it was difficult to obtain a full picture of the damage. The Noto Peninsula features mountainous terrain, is surrounded by the sea, and has limited flat land. As a result, landslides and other damage destroyed most roads that would have been accessible to police units, making overland access to greatly affected areas such as Suzu City and Wajima City difficult. Given these circumstances, the police, with the cooperation of the Self-Defense Forces, transported members of the Inter-prefectural Emergency Rescue Units (Security Units) by large Self-Defense Forces transport helicopters. In addition, by utilizing four-wheel-drive vehicles to collect information on passable routes, the police were able to rapidly deploy units to the affected areas.

Based on this experience, the police are strengthening their capabilities to gather and aggregate information during the earliest stages of large-scale disasters so that disaster-area police and Police Disaster Response Units can carry out initial response activities—such as search-and-rescue operations and the collection of traffic-related information—swiftly and accurately. The police are moving forward with efforts to ensure they can quickly establish a Disaster Security Headquarters and expand the use of advanced police information and communications infrastructure systems (PIII) (Note 1), unmanned aerial vehicles, and helicopter television systems (Note 2) to ensure rapid transmission of video footage.

To ensure transport of necessary equipment, the police are developing small, lightweight rescue equipment designed for air transport, and four-wheel-drive vehicles capable of transporting large equipment over rough terrain. The police also conduct regular training related to unit assembly and deployment as well as routinely carry out thorough inspections and maintenance of equipment to facilitate rapid unit deployment in the event of a disaster.

(2) Search-and-rescue operations

① Fostering awareness of community-based mutual assistance, etc.

In this disaster response, Inter-prefectural Emergency Rescue Units (Security Units) dispatched from across the country and Emergency Disaster Security Squads worked closely with the Ishikawa Prefectural Police. In coordination with the Self-Defense Forces, local governments, fire departments, and DMAT (Note 3), they carried out rescue operations at the sites of collapsed buildings and search operations for missing persons at landslide sites and in areas where large numbers of buildings had been destroyed by fire. Still, following the disaster, it took some time for these units to arrive at the affected areas and commence operations.

Based on this experience, the police are working to ensure that, until Inter-prefectural Emergency Rescue Units (Security Units) and other responding units arrive at disaster sites, community police officers assigned to police boxes and residential posts in the affected areas can reliably carry out rescue activities in coordination with voluntary disaster prevention organizations and fire brigades. Police stations take the lead in regularly conducting disaster response training with the participation of area residents, while community police officers at police boxes and residential posts actively participate in training led by voluntary disaster prevention organizations and fire brigades, thereby strengthening the police's disaster response capabilities and fostering awareness of mutual assistance within local communities.



Unit transport by a large Self-Defense Forces transport helicopter



Video transmission via PIII



Training with small, lightweight rescue equipment



Search operations by an Emergency Disaster Security Squad

Note 1: See page 226 (Chapter 7).

2: A system that transmits aerial footage of disaster sites, captured by police aircraft, to ground-based receiving equipment

3: DMAT stands for Disaster Medical Assistance Team. This is a medical team composed of doctors, nurses, and other personnel who have received specialized training to operate at large-scale disaster sites.

② Ensuring redundancy (Note 1) in communications

During this disaster response, information communications essential to police operations were secured through the IPR-type Police Mobile Radio Communication System (Note 2), which is independently developed, maintained and managed by the police. By contrast, the PIII system, which relies on commercial telecommunications operators' networks, became difficult to use in some areas. Based on this experience, the police are examining the potential use of new equipment that utilizes satellite communications to ensure that the functions of the PIII system can be maintained even if telecommunications operators' networks are disrupted and to support rapid collection of information during initial response.



Operations by the Mobile Police Communications Squads



Temporary installation of receiving equipment for a helicopter television system

③ Countermeasures against false and misleading information

This disaster response once again reconfirmed that false and misleading information related to requests for assistance can spread on social media, which poses the risk of hindering rescue operations. Based on this experience, the police are implementing measures to address false and misleading information during large-scale disasters, including the establishment of frameworks that enable them to promptly request that social media platforms remove such information, which constitutes illegal information, in order to ensure that disaster response activities can be carried out swiftly and accurately. The police are also carrying out firm enforcement actions in response to illegal activities (Note 3).

(3) Traffic measures

During this disaster response, it proved difficult to collect traffic information in areas without traffic information-gathering equipment, such as traffic surveillance cameras and infrared beacons (Note 4). Based on this experience, the police are identifying in advance those locations where monitoring traffic conditions during large-scale disasters is expected to be necessary, but where the police would not be able to do so immediately on their own. For these locations, the police are strengthening cooperation with road administrators and considering the deployment of information-gathering equipment that can easily be installed and managed, such as cameras.



Monitoring traffic flow and volume on the streets



Assessment of on-site traffic conditions

Note 1: By preparing equipment in quantities exceeding the minimum required, systems are designed to ensure continued service provision even if some equipment fails.

2: IPR stands for Integrated Police Radio, which is a mobile communications system with excellent disaster resilience that is independently developed, maintained, and managed by the police. Even in areas not normally covered by police radio signals or at disaster sites, radio units mounted on patrol vehicles and other platforms can temporarily relay communications among surrounding radio units, enabling police personnel at the scene to communicate via radio.

3: In this disaster, a company employee who, pretending to be a victim, posted false information on an X (formerly Twitter) account claiming that rescue was needed was arrested on suspicion of fraudulent obstruction of business. (See the Feature on page 6.)

4: Roadside-installed infrared communication devices that detect passing vehicles, measure traffic volume, and mediate communications between in-vehicle devices and traffic control centers

(4) Investigative activities

① Countermeasures against malicious crimes exploiting the disaster

During this disaster response, there were concerns about malicious crimes that would take advantage of the earthquake, including fraud related to donations. In cooperation with relevant administrative agencies, the police collected, consolidated, and analyzed information on damage caused by crimes to ensure thorough enforcement. The police will continue to strengthen information-gathering efforts related to malicious crimes that exploit disasters.

② Establishment of investigative frameworks

During this disaster response, because it was difficult for the Ishikawa Prefectural Police to establish a sufficient investigative framework on their own, the Special Mobile Investigation Unit ^(Note 1) was dispatched to the Ishikawa Prefectural Police to establish the necessary framework.

Based on this experience, the police have organized and disseminated procedures to ensure that the Unit is dispatched swiftly and smoothly in order to appropriately establish investigative frameworks for crimes exploiting disasters, including theft. In addition, to strengthen investigative capabilities at police stations in affected areas, the police have made it possible for the Unit to operate under the direction of the chief of the affected police station.

CASE

A 45-year-old company executive and others visited homes that had roofs damaged by the Noto Peninsula Earthquake in 2024 and established high-priced service contracts in connection with repair work involving the installation of blue tarpaulins on the damaged roofs. In doing so, they provided customers with written contracts that did not include provisions regarding contract cancellation and concluded service contracts totaling approximately 300,000 yen with three customers.

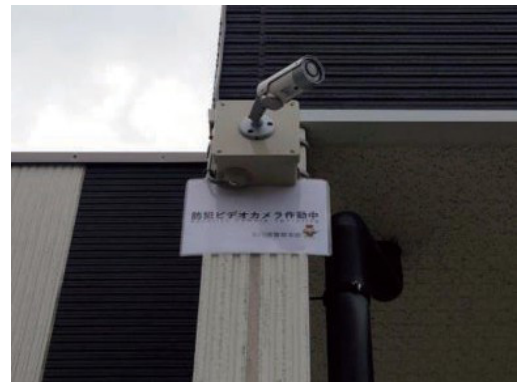
In February 2024, the police arrested the man and three others for violations of the Act on Specified Commercial Transactions, including the provision on incomplete contract documents. To prevent recurrence of similar cases, the police filed a request pursuant to the Act with the local government having jurisdiction over the location of the corporation operated by the man, requesting implementation of appropriate measures. (Ishikawa Prefectural Police)

(5) Crime prevention measures

① Establishment of Special Crime Prevention Units

During this disaster response, as part of crime prevention efforts in the affected areas, the police installed 1,006 security cameras at evacuation centers and on streets in areas where many residents had evacuated. The police considered the crime situation, disaster victims' needs regarding security camera installation, and the cameras' crime-deterrence effect. In response to these efforts, disaster victims commented that having security cameras made them feel safer.

Based on this experience, the police established Special Crime Prevention Units ^(Note 2) within Police Disaster Response Units to deter crime in affected areas. Working in coordination with the local police in affected areas, these Units conduct on-site surveys mainly at evacuation centers, the streets in areas where many residents have evacuated, the main thoroughfares in the affected areas, and shopping districts, and they install the necessary security cameras.



A security camera installed in an affected area

Note 1: A unit composed of police officers assigned to the criminal investigation divisions of prefectural police

Note 2: A unit composed of police officers from prefectural police forces who possess the knowledge and skills necessary to install security cameras and carry out related activities

2 Strengthening patrols

In this disaster response, to ensure the safety and security of the affected areas, a total of 12,035 patrol cars were dispatched to the Ishikawa Prefectural Police. Working closely with units such as the Special Mobile Patrol Units (Note 1), the Ishikawa Prefectural Police conducted patrols in the affected areas and around evacuation centers. In the course of doing so, issues were identified regarding the units' organizational structure as well as communication and coordination between the Ishikawa Prefectural Police and the units.

Based on this experience, the National Police Agency reviewed the procedures to ensure the rapid and smooth deployment of such units, clarified standards for the number of personnel to be dispatched per prefectural police force and for the command officers to be dispatched, and notified all prefectural police of these standards.

3 Utilization of small unmanned aircraft

In this disaster response, small unmanned aircraft were utilized to collect information on damage conditions and to search for missing people.

The police are promoting the deployment of small unmanned aircraft capable of both wired and wireless operation (Note 2). For example, immediately after a disaster, such aircraft are operated wirelessly to collect information on damage conditions, and some time later, operations are switched to wired mode, which enables long-duration flights while supplying power. These aircraft are also used in patrol and surveillance activities to ensure the safety and security of affected areas.



Patrols in affected areas using patrol cars

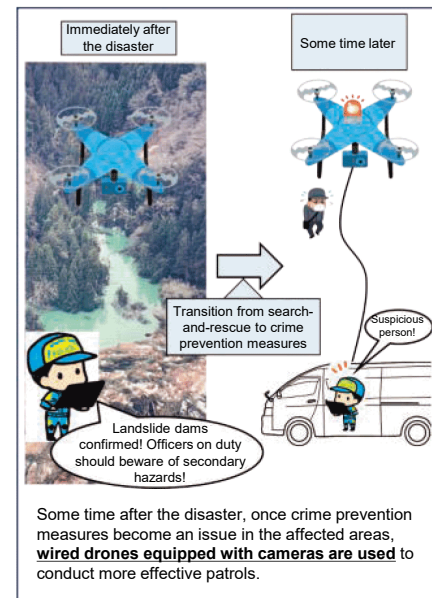


Image of small unmanned aircraft capable of wired and wireless operation

(6) Information dissemination on police activities

In this disaster response, the police actively disseminated information via social media and other channels, including information on police rescue operations, patrols in the affected areas, and information related to crime prevention in order to alleviate anxiety related to evacuation while being attentive to the feelings of disaster victims. To ensure that such information reached disaster victims effectively, the National Police Agency provided various media outlets with footage of police activities in the affected areas and disseminated such information through the Agency's website and social media accounts dedicated to disaster information.

The police will continue to implement proactive measures to ensure that information on police activities is delivered swiftly and accurately to disaster victims in the event of a large-scale disaster.



Public outreach via X (formerly Twitter)



Public outreach via YouTube

Note 1: A unit composed mainly of police officers from the community affairs divisions of prefectural police
 Note 2: Small unmanned aircraft capable of switching between wired and wireless operation

(7) Maintaining police activities during prolonged disaster response

① Provision of equipment to sustain police activities

In this disaster response, prolonged water outages in Ishikawa Prefecture led to shortages of water needed for police activities, such as cleaning equipment, as well as water for daily use, including for toilets, handwashing, and showers.

Based on this experience, the police have provided prefectural police and others with portable water recycling treatment plants, which regenerate and recirculate used water for use as water for daily activities including showering, as well as simple toilets for use during water outages.

To ensure the health of police personnel engaged in disaster response activities under severe conditions such as extreme cold and heavy snowfall, the police have also supplied Inter-prefectural Emergency Rescue Units and others with cold-weather gloves having insulated linings and knee-high boots with water resistance and other protective properties.



Portable water recycling treatment plant

② Establishment of reception frameworks for units deployed to affected areas

In this disaster response, the Ishikawa Prefectural Police arranged accommodations and procured bedding and other necessities to receive Police Disaster Response Units.

Based on this experience, the police expanded the support frameworks under which the National Police Agency Emergency Disaster Headquarters and other prefectural police assist police in affected areas with the extensive administrative tasks involved in receiving Police Disaster Response Units, thereby enabling the Units to operate smoothly.

In preparation for large-scale disasters, the police are working to establish cooperative frameworks with relevant businesses by routinely identifying accommodation providers, such as inns and hotels, as well as linen suppliers, and by requesting their cooperation in supplying goods to the police and providing other assistance in the event of a large-scale disaster.

③ Measures to safeguard the physical and mental health of police personnel

In this disaster response, police personnel were required to travel on foot for extended periods of time and engage in prolonged disaster response operations under harsh conditions, including power outages, water supply disruptions, and severe cold. In particular, officers of the Ishikawa Prefectural Police continued to carry out their duties while they themselves and their family members were affected by the disaster, subjecting them to a considerable physical and mental burden.



Police officers traveling on foot for extended periods of time

From the perspective of ensuring a sustainable disaster response framework, the police took steps to secure an operational foundation by strengthening police station staffing and to reduce the burden on personnel by temporarily adopting shift-based work arrangements. The police also implemented measures to safeguard the physical and mental health of police personnel, including disseminating health management precautions specific to disaster-stricken areas to officers from other prefectures who were dispatched to the affected areas.

Based on this experience, the National Police Agency is providing prefectural police with fundamental knowledge and the details of specific initiatives necessary for health management measures during large-scale disasters, thus further promoting efforts to safeguard the physical and mental health of police personnel engaged in disaster response activities.

Introduction and Use of Advanced Technologies in Policing

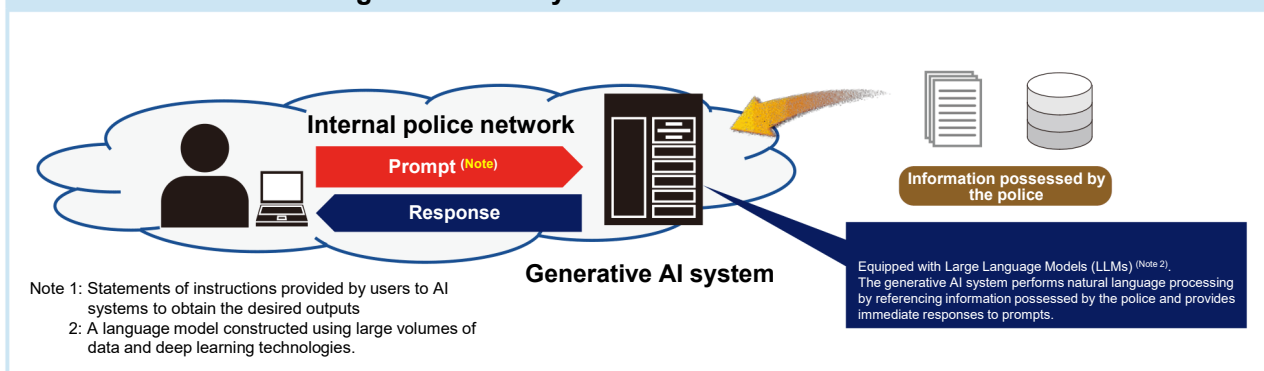
The police are working to enhance policing by effectively incorporating rapidly advancing science and technology. This section introduces initiatives aimed at streamlining and enhancing policing through the introduction and use of advanced technologies, including AI and small unmanned aircraft (drones).

(1) Initiatives for the use of AI in policing

① Development and verification of a closed environment for generative AI system

To streamline and enhance operations by utilizing generative AI, in fiscal 2024, the National Police Agency developed an environment in which generative AI can be used on a closed internal police network as part of the BRIDGE program ^(Note), and verified its functions, including draft document creation and generation of program code. Following confirmation of its effectiveness, provisional operation of the system at the National Police Agency began in June 2025.

Chart II-1 Overview of the generative AI system on a closed network



② Development of an AI training tool for interviewing children

From the perspective of reducing the burden on children and ensuring the reliability of their statements, police, prosecutors, and child consultation centers are discussing and promoting the use of representative interviews, in which a designated interviewer conducts interviews with children. The police provide training, including role-playing exercises, to help officers acquire interviewing techniques that take into consideration the psychological states and characteristics of children; however, there is a growing need for training that more closely reflects actual interview practices.



Examples of avatars for the AI training tool

The National Police Agency developed an AI-based training tool as part of the BRIDGE program between fiscal 2023 and 2024. This tool enables training that replicates interactions with actual children through dialogue with child avatars. The police plan to begin nationwide operation of the tool in fiscal 2025.

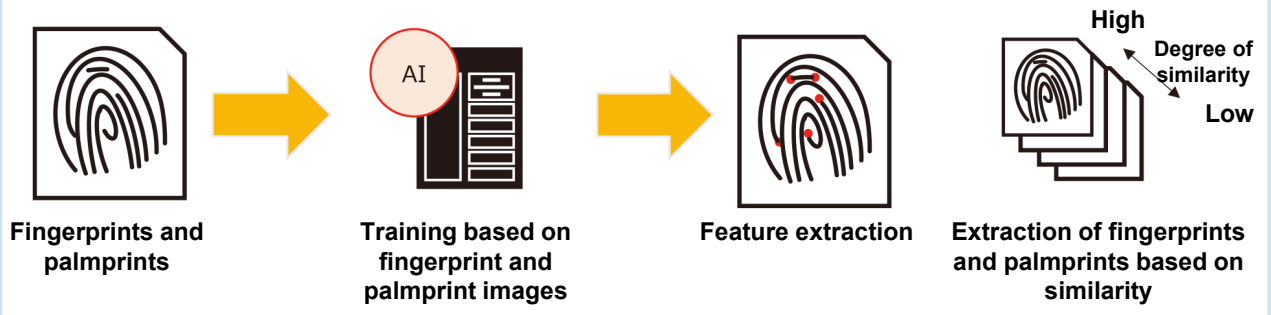
③ Demonstration experiment to enhance and streamline fingerprint and palmprint identification operations

In police operations involving database registration and comparison of fingerprints and palmprints collected from suspects and those believed to have been left by perpetrators at crime scenes, the police are operating an automated fingerprint and palmprint identification system to improve efficiency. However, some tasks are still processed manually, leaving room for further enhancement and streamlining of such operations.

Note: BRIDGE is an abbreviation of “programs for Bridging the gap between R&d and the IDeal society (society 5.0) and Generating Economic and social value.” It refers to a program led by the Council for Science, Technology and Innovation, which is chaired by the Prime Minister, under which promotional funding is allocated to initiatives designated by relevant ministries in fields where expanded public and private R&D investment is anticipated.

In fiscal 2024, the National Police Agency conducted a demonstration experiment using AI to extract and compare fingerprint and palmpoint features ^(Note). The results confirmed that a number of features sufficient for comparison could be extracted. Regarding the comparison of fingerprints and palmpoints collected by impression, it was confirmed that fingerprints and palmpoints from the same individual could be extracted correctly. Consideration of future operational use is underway based on these results.

Chart II-2 Overview of demonstration experiment to enhance and streamline fingerprint and palmpoint identification operations



(2) Promoting the use of small unmanned aircraft, etc. in various police activities

① Small unmanned aircraft

The police are working to streamline and enhance various police activities through the effective use of small unmanned aircraft. Specifically, these aircraft are used to search for missing people in areas that are difficult for people to access, to create on-site sketches in traffic accident investigations, and to confirm on-site conditions from elevated positions during security operations. In the event of a disaster, footage captured by small unmanned aircraft is transmitted in real time to the relevant police headquarters, the National Police Agency, and the Prime Minister’s Office, enabling rapid assessment of disaster conditions and supporting rescue of victims.

CASE

In April 2024, the Toyama Prefectural Police established a Drone Patrol Unit under its mobile patrol unit that is responsible for initial police response to incidents and accidents that occur within the prefecture. This Unit conducts patrols with small unmanned aircraft carried in patrol cars and, when the Unit is dispatched, uses such aircraft in a wide range of cases that stretch across police divisions.



Drone Patrol Unit

② Wearable cameras

The use of wearable cameras by police officers while performing their duties in order to record their actions is thought to contribute to objective verification of the appropriateness of police conduct and to the preservation of evidence of crimes directly observed by police officers.

To assess the effectiveness and to identify issues related to the use of wearable cameras in community policing activities, traffic enforcement activities, and crowd security operations, the National Police Agency plans to implement pilot projects with selected prefectural police during fiscal 2025.

Note: The ridges that form fingerprint and palmpoint patterns (the lines formed by raised epidermal skin) have points at which their flow begins or ends (ridge endings), and points at which the ridges bifurcate or merge (ridge bifurcations).