7 missing snowboarders found alive

Wednesday, 06 February 2008

Seven snowboarders who had been missing in the mountains near a ski resort in Akiotacho, Hiroshima Prefecture, since Sunday, were rescued near National Highway Route 488 in Masuda, Shimane Prefecture, at 9:35 a.m. on Tuesday, the Akiotacho municipal government's disaster countermeasures office said.

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The snowboarders descended from the mountain, accompanied by members of the Ground Self-Defense Force, and were carried by helicopters to three hospitals in Hiroshima.

The seven are Takahiko Aoki, 34, self-employed, and Yasuo Matsubara, 34, a carpenter, both of Shunan, Yamaguchi Prefecture; Shigenori Hattori, 40, a carpenter of Hiraocho, Yamaguchi Prefecture; Akihiko Sugiyama, 36, self-employed of Nishi Ward, Hiroshima; Nobuyuki Nakamura, 30, a company employee of Higashi Ward, Hiroshima; Muneaki Kaneto, 33, and Shinichi Hatahashi, 31, both of whom are part-time workers at the Osorakan Ski Field resort.

According to the countermeasures office, a rescue team comprising 24 personnel from a local fire brigade and the GSDF found two of the missing seven snowboarding along a road connecting Mt. Kyurakan to Mt. Hiromi in Shimane Prefecture.

Acting on information from the two, the squad found the other five about 100 meters east on a forest road. The five were also descending from the mountain by snowboarding or walking.

The squad informed the countermeasures office of their discovery by radio.

The seven took shelter in an abandoned primary school building. They shared food they carried with them, such as energy bars, and built a fire. The snow was about 2 meters deep in the area where they got lost and was difficult to walk in, the office said.

At 10:50 a.m., the seven boarded ambulances and GSDF vehicles that waited on

the national highway in Masuda. They were then taken to Hikimi Chuo Park in the city, where they boarded helicopters to hospitals in Hiroshima.

The search efforts, involving about 600 people, began at about 7:20 a.m. GSDF personnel trained in mountain-rescue procedures rode to the top of the mountain on a lift, followed by a rescue team of the Hiroshima prefectural police.

The GSDF members searched the southwestern part of 1,346-meter-high Mt. Osorakan, while the police searched from a helicopter.

The snowboarders climbed Mt. Osorakan between 10:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. Sunday. They were last heard from about 3:30 p.m. on the same day, by cell phone.

Five were visitors to the ski resort and the other two were part-time workers at the resort. All had more than 10 years of snowboarding experience, but were not properly equipped for the harsh weather conditions.

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Rescued 7 relieved, apologetic

Looking relieved after being rescued 42 hours after they went missing Sunday, the seven snowboarders apologized at press conferences in Hiroshima on Tuesday for the trouble caused by their reckless actions.

Meanwhile, sleep-deprived family members were pleased that their loved ones had been rescued.

The seven underwent medical examinations, but none needed to be hospitalized.

Kaneto said, "I completely underestimated the mountain, but was made aware of its rigors in winter."

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