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Record snow hits central region

Record levels of snow yesterday hit the Chungcheong provinces, paralyzing highway traffic, disrupting train operations and causing severe property damage in the nation's central region.

Daejeon, about 160 kilometers south of Seoul, saw a record 49 centimeters as of 4 p.m., its highest level since recording began in 1969, the Korea Meteorological Administration said.

The heavy snowfall forced more than 2,500 primary, middle and high schools and colleges in Daejeon and the surrounding Chungcheong area to close today, said officials at the Education Ministry.

It also caused power failures affecting more than 9,000 homes, disaster control officials said.

An estimated 27.6 billion won worth of property damage was reported.

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Vehicles stand bumper to bumper for hours yesterday on an expressway in Cheongwon, North Chungcheong Province, when record levels of spring snow fell in the central region. [Courtesy Chungcheong Ilbo]

Roofs and greenhouses collapsed while some 35 sections of the nation's two major highways linking Seoul and Busan were blocked off, the officials said.

The snowfall began to subside last night but as much as 20 centimeters are forecast by

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this morning for eastern coastal areas, said weather officials.

Morning temperatures in Seoul are expected to drop to minus 6 degrees Celsius. Morning lows are forecast to fall further tomorrow to minus 7 degrees Celsius in the capital and minus 8 degrees Celsius in Chuncheon, Gangwon Province, but milder weather will return tomorrow night, according to the agency.

On Thursday, Seoul saw 18.2 centimeters of snow, the heaviest level for March since recording began in 1907.

The unexpected heavy spring snow puzzled even meteorologists, who called it "a very rare phenomenon."

"Nearly twice the amount of snow we predicted fell," said Kim Tae-ryong, a public relations officer for the weather body.

Cold atmospheric pressure from northwest regions and warm atmospheric pressure from the south met to create unstable air conditions, bringing more snow clouds than expected to the country, he said.

The weather agency predicted there could be more snow this month but not as much as this. "Chances appear slim that such snow, which was the heaviest in 97 years, will fall again," Kim said.

It might have been a pleasure for children, who rushed to make snowmen and throw snowballs, but to many busy people who wanted to get home quickly after a long day of work, the heavy snow was nothing but irritating.

"I go back home by first taking the subway and then transferring to the bus," said Goo Ki-hyang, 23, who works for a computer game company. "There was hardly any empty space inside the subway train, and the bus I was waiting for came about 20 minutes late."

Passengers wet with melted snow seemed disturbed at being so close to each other, with some grumbling at the bus driver, Goo said.

"It was so much in disorder. Some even asked for the driver to let them get off in the middle of the road," she said.

Seoul City ordered subway and bus corporations to extend their operations for one hour until 2 a.m. Friday but many passengers suffered inside packed vehicles.

It was a worse nightmare for those drivers not smart enough to have switched to public transportation.

"I didn't know the weather forecast and suddenly snow started to fall while I was on the road," said corporate employee Choe Woo-sung, 24. "It took me one and a half hours longer than usual."

Seoul housewife Yoo Hyun-ok, 47, is stuck in the southwestern county of Iksan after going there to meet some friends. "My husband dissuaded me from going back, saying it was dangerous to drive a car because of snow."

There were problems not only on the ground but also up in the air. An airplane bound for Vietnam had to return to Incheon International Airport at 11 p.m. Thursday, three hours after takeoff. Several more planes followed suit.

Meanwhile, the National Disaster Prevention and Countermeasures Headquarters in Seoul has sent about 47,000 road workers to most parts of the city and deployed 1,417 trucks with 100,000 bags of calcium chloride to melt snow.

Yesterday's morning rush was reportedly less serious because most commuters chose public transportation, with the number of subway users said to have jumped 70 percent.

"It was an unusually crowded morning," Goo said. "I was late for work even though I left home 30 minutes earlier. Almost everyone was the same."

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By Kim So-young

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