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Government Criticized for Slow Response to Record Snowfall Estimated Damage Stands at 378 Billion Won

By Soh Ji-young
Staff Reporter

As financial damage from the record snowfall last week reached 378 billion won, massive criticisms cascaded on state authorities for reacting slowly to the natural disaster and failing to minimize public inconvenience.

The National Disaster Prevention and Countermeasures Headquarters said on Sunday that more than 6,216 facilities including 1,965 hectares of greenhouses and 60 buildings, were destroyed in the heavy snowfall which hit the nation Thursday and Friday, resulting in a total of 378.7 billion won of property damage.

Officials said that the figure is expected to rise further after the government finishes its investigation into the exact extent of the damage.

Although the snowfall was the heaviest the country had seen in March in a century, highway officials moved belatedly to restrict traffic on the Seoul-Pusan (Kyongbu) Expressway and the Chunchon-Taegu (Chungbu) expressways from Friday afternoon, leaving thousands of cars trapped on the highways until the next day.

In the afternoon, Korea Highway Corporation president Oh Jum-lock expressed his will to resign after protest messages from angry citizens flooded the corporation's Web site. The state-run corporation is responsible for construction, repair and maintenance of major roads in the country.

"This is a natural disaster, but I feel obliged to take responsibility for all the inconvenience caused by the snowfall," Oh said.

The government is also coming under fire for reacting too slowly.

About two days after the snow blanketed most of the nation, the government convened an emergency meeting Saturday morning to mobilize soldiers, police and other forces into clean-up operations.

In the meeting, officials said Prime Minister Goh Kun strongly criticized related ministers, saying that the government failed to systematically deal with the snowfall and map out effective countermeasures.

The government held another meeting on Sunday morning to discuss measures to assist disaster-stricken farms and find ways to step up the management of expressways to prepare for similar incidents in the future.

Inaccurate weather forecasts which failed to give out warnings of heavy snowfall also increased confusion among government agencies and the public.

On Thursday, when a record 18.5 centimeters of snow fell in Seoul, the Korea Meteorological Administration (KMA) had only predicted 1 to 5 centimeters of snow in its morning forecast. The snowfall was the maximum Seoul has seen in March since meteorological forecasting began in 1904.

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`` The heavy snowfall which hit Seoul and Taejon was extremely rare for this time of year and therefore difficult to forecast," a KMA official said.

Opposition leader Choe Byung-yeol, Government Administration and Home Affairs Minister Huh Sung-kwan and other officials paid visits to the hardest-hit areas in South Chungchong Province.

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