

Unprecedented Disaster Hits Eastern Japan

Rubble Spreading Out Before Us

While standing at a crossroad in Rikuzen-Takada City, one of the towns most affected by the tsunami on March 11, 2011, I heard somebody groaning from behind me. I turned around but found nothing but the expansive landscape of stacks of rubble, without a single person around. I may have imagined the voice in my head. Some hundreds or thousands of people are still under this rubble. The streets of Rikuzen-Takada indeed turned into a mountain of rubble. I had been here once, many years ago, and still have memories of the beautiful harbor town. Most of the city's damage was brought by the *tsunami*. Those houses standing on the hill and not affected by it have remained safe, and the people residing there continue to live there as they had before. The earthquake alone did not cause serious damage to most of the buildings in the area, but the big *tsunami* that followed washed out everything. A distance of a few meters determined the safety of the buildings.

Being in the affected area, I found two things that I have never thought about before when watching the news on TV. One is the smell: When houses are washed away, lavatories, kerosene heaters and other things are also washed away, naturally creating a smell of all these things mixed together. The other thing I discovered is that many houses/cars carried away into the sea are still there. Looking at the sea, I can easily spot many cars that are still sinking. The people who were driving them may still be in them. In some parts, clearing of the rubble is already starting, and bodies are being found everyday. When I talked to one member of the self-defense force carrying out rescue operations, he said, "It is most painful to find the dead body of a small school child carrying a satchel on his/her back."

The Mountain of Relief Goods and Loss of Delivery Functions

In storage facilities, relief goods sent from around the country are piled up high. Each is the same, with a huge amount of food, clothes, commodities and blankets. Yet the people in the shelter we visited all complained about the shortage of food or unavailability of what they really needed. This is probably due to the absence of good communication. Since communication tools are pretty much down, including telephone

lines and the Internet, town halls are not functioning. This is a lesson for us that being well prepared is the key to dealing with a crisis.

To ask for the acceptance of our relief goods, I negotiated with officials of the prefectural government and municipal governments, but they could not make an immediate decision. “I will respond to you later,” or “I need to consult with my boss” were their common responses. “You see, now is not the time to say that,” I replied in frustration. Faced by the crisis, they could not make decisions out of fear of criticism. Thus, things takes time, and do not move forward. This is not a good culture.

Yet, the people on the frontline are working very hard and doing their best. Officials of Ofunato City stay overnight in the city hall despite the fact that they themselves are victims. Employees of municipal offices and medical personnel are indeed struggling to carry out their huge workloads with small teams.

Reconstruction is Not Easy

At any rate, the nuclear power plant is a tricky issue. While a country with the cruel experiences of atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan has underestimated the horrors of nuclear energy getting out of control. The contaminated cooling water was dumped into the sea, which then contaminated the ocean. If the reactor is not cooled, it may cause a catastrophe. And yet there is no more room to dump the contaminated water. In this paradox, the crisis has continued. Even we can evade the worst scenario, it may take a considerably long period of time for the peripheral areas around the Fukushima plant to become free from radioactive contamination. What will happen to the agricultural and fishery industries? The shortage of electric power will inevitably impact industrial activities. The economy will continue to be stagnant or become worse, affecting employment. It is a fear that many of the small subcontractors or local industries in the disaster-stricken areas will be driven into bankruptcy due to unavoidable stops in operation, bringing about a large number of workers being laid off. Without a great deal of preparedness and good planning, it is impossible to overcome this catastrophic situation.

People are patient and determined as they continue their struggles. A junior high teacher told us, “Even if we cannot use the school buildings, we will start the new school year on April 8.” When we were in Ofunato, a high school was announcing entrance exam

results although it was right after the disaster. This indicates their strong will to not be discouraged by the disaster. However, some of those students who are successful in the examination had lost their house, and even their parents. I am very anxious about how they will cope with this situation and what will happen on them.

One elderly woman who opened the door of her house to us when we dropped by cheerfully said, "I am doing volunteer activities with people who come from abroad." People are not necessarily staying in the shelter as victims who are weak. I also brought some *sake* (rice wine) to the affected areas. In fact, my colleagues tried to stop me from bringing it, saying, "You will be frowned upon." At the shelter, I asked some people in a small voice, "Would you like to have *sake*? I have it with me." They were all pleased and welcomed this unexpected gift.

Bringing Hope to the Affected People

What will happen on the evacuees? For the time being, they are being accommodated in the shelter, but it is not likely that they will continue to stay in the gymnasium for long. If they are accommodated in temporary housing, they will need to buy furniture, heaters, kitchen utensils, etc., but, they do not have money. They will need refrigerators and other appliances. I wonder if the government will give financial aid to these people.

In the disaster stricken areas, people continue to face many difficulties. It is not only a matter of shortages in food, medicine, medical treatment or clothes. It is a matter affecting their entire lives.

Under these circumstances, what can the Buraku Liberation League do? At moment, we do whatever we can. We can send donation and relief goods. We can send volunteers to the areas. In response to the call for relief by the BLL, many members have sent relief goods. We all remain sympathetic to the victims and the vulnerable. We will not give up this spirit.

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