

“Toward an Intercultural Japan”

Yamawaki Keizo, Professor, School of Global Japanese Studies, Meiji University

No. 48 – Great Eastern Japan Earthquake (March 23, 2011)

On March 11, 2011 the greatest earthquake in recorded history of Japan, struck its eastern region and immediately afterwards a tremendous *tsunami* devastated the Pacific Coast of the northeastern region resulting in innumerable casualties. As of March 21st, over 20,000 persons were listed as dead or missing and the number of persons residing in emergency evacuation shelters exceeded 300,000. Among the victims there were many foreign nationals. In Miyagi, Iwate, and Fukushima Prefectures where the damage was most severe, there are approximately 35,000 registered foreign residents.

When the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake struck the Kobe area in January 1995, many citizen volunteers aided the victims, and as a result that year came to be known as the ‘dawn of volunteerism. Some of those volunteers provided multilingual phone consultation and information to foreign residents, and they created numerous grassroots non-governmental organizations promoting intercultural community development. Then, in October 2004 when the Niigata Prefecture Chuetsu Earthquake struck, these organizations cooperated with the local governments in the disaster area immediately after the quake, and provided information in various languages in order to assist foreign victims.

Based upon this experience, immediately after the latest catastrophe occurred, citizens’ groups, universities, and international organizations initiated multilingual information distribution, including announcements in easy-to-understand Japanese, in order to vigorously aid the international community in Japan. And this time, in addition to Internet-based websites, Twitter and other social networking media played a major role in the dispersal of information. NHK, Japan’s public TV and radio broadcaster, also carried multilingual disaster announcements during its programs and via the Internet.

Although international exchange associations affiliated with local governments in the disaster area, such as the Miyagi International Association, offered multilingual telephone consultation and information, the national government, such as the Prime Minister’s Secretariat and concerned ministries, have made announcements primarily in Japanese and only occasionally in English.

To overcome a disaster of this magnitude, cooperation between the public and private sectors is essential, thus on March 13th the national government assigned Ms. Tsujimoto Kiyomi, Member of the House of Representatives, in charge of overseeing the disaster zone volunteer effort and on the 16th it established the Volunteer Coordination Office in the Cabinet Secretariat. Charged with ample experience to assist foreign victims in the two aforementioned Hanshin-Awaji and Niigata disasters, Mr. Tamura Taro, head of the Center for Multicultural Information and Assistance in Osaka was appointed to the Office's staff.

Disaster relief from abroad too has been brisk. Since the earthquake struck, more than 150 countries and international bodies have offered assistance. Ten or more countries including the United States, Russia, France, Korea, and China dispatched emergency rescue teams to the disaster zone and contributed to the rescue effort. Around the world, charity events have taken place to aid the victims. This assistance from overseas can be seen in part as directed towards their citizens in Japan who were affected, but it is certainly a clear evidence of solidarity within the international community.

The circumstances in which this vigorous domestic and international aid effort is taking place cannot but be regarded as the most dire that Japan has experienced since the end of World War II. Damage to the Fukushima nuclear power plant has created the worst nuclear crisis ever known in Japan, with the massive release of radioactive substances posing immeasurable danger. The earthquake combined with the *tsunami* and the nuclear accident which followed now must be regarded as the gravest disaster that humankind has ever faced.

Regarding the nuclear accident's severity there is a large difference between the views expressed by the Japanese government and media and those by their foreign counterparts. The French Nuclear Safety Authority and the Institute for Science and International Security, a U.S. non-profit institution, judged this accident to be at Level 6 on the International Nuclear and Radiological Events scale that ranks events from 1 to 7 with Level 7 being the worst, whereas the Japanese government initially determined it to be Level 4 and later raised the assessment to Level 5. The Japanese government initiated an evacuation of residents within 20 kilometers of the plant and recommended those living within 20-30 kilometers to remain indoors, while the United States and other countries urged their citizens within 80 kilometers of the plant to evacuate.

As a result of foreign government statements and media broadcasts, many foreign residents, particularly international students in eastern Japan, chose to return temporarily to their home countries. Furthermore, some embassies and foreign corporations located in Tokyo opted to move their operations to Osaka or Hong Kong, etc. Many foreign residents staying on in Japan feel very much ill at ease due to a lack of information. Foreign governments and media have also voiced concern that the information provided by the Japanese government is insufficient. It was

within this context that on March 18th the Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency visited Japan and formally requested Prime Minister Kan to be more forthcoming with information.

It is hoped that in respect to the earthquake, *tsunami*, and the nuclear accident, in particular, the Japanese government will offer as much information to the foreign media as to the domestic media, and at the same time that the national and local government offices in Japan will do their utmost to ensure that foreign residents are not placed at a disadvantage in terms of available information. This is imperative because the nuclear accident could cause serious damage to the whole world and requires mobilization of all available resources at home and abroad to reach a safe resolution. Even if further escalation of the nuclear crisis can be avoided, in order to fully recover from this disaster Japan is without question dependent on cooperation from the global community as well as the combined strength of all its residents in the country regardless of nationality or ethnicity.

<Information sources for foreign nationals>

* Miyagi International Association

<http://www.h5.dion.ne.jp/~mia/>

* Fukushima International Association

<http://www.worldvillage.org/index.php>

* Iwate International Association

<http://iwate-ia.or.jp/>

- * Multilingual Support Center for the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake (English, Chinese, Portuguese, Spanish) a service provided by the Multi-cultural Society Development Association operating in Otsu City, Shiga Prefecture

<http://tabumane.jimdo.com/>

* FM Wai-wai

<http://www.tcc117.org/fmyy/index.php>

* Center for Multilingual Multicultural Education and Research

<http://www.tufs.ac.jp/blog/ts/g/cemmer/index.html>

* BRICKS Corporation

<http://www.bricks-corp.com/>

* NHK World (in 18 languages)

<http://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/index.html>

* Portal Site on Policies for Foreign Residents

<http://www8.cao.go.jp/teiju-portal/jpn/index.html>

* IOM Japan

<http://www.iomjapan.org/index.cfm>