

“Toward an Intercultural Japan”

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Since the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake, 157 countries as well as 42 international organizations have offered their support. Many of those have provided financial assistance or sent supplies; additionally, 23 countries have dispatched emergency rescue teams. Among these are developing countries such as Laos and Afghanistan which have received assistance from Japan in the past. And it is not only foreign governments; non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and private corporations have offered aid too, with 43 NGOs from 16 countries coming to Japan to help. In addition, around the world numerous charity events have been conducted, and citizens at the grassroots level have been sending donations to Japan.

On the other hand, particularly as a result of the explosions that occurred at the Fukushima nuclear plant, governments of various countries issued evacuation advisories for their citizens, and as a result a great many foreign residents of the Tohoku Region and the Capital area evacuated to their home countries. In this context, some have argued that foreign residents cannot be depended upon in times of crisis. An influential column in one of the major national newspapers in Japan published in mid-March noted that “Compared to normal weekends, there are few foreigners to be seen on the street in Ginza or Omotesandō in Tōkyō. Tourists, businesspersons, exchange students, and diplomats are all rushing out of Japan. While being grateful for the tangible and spiritual support received, we must accept the fact that recovery will be up to us.”

The phrase “up to us” can be read as meaning ‘us Japanese’ but in fact, following the earthquake, more than a few foreigners remained in Japan actively participating as volunteers in relief/recovery efforts. In Miyagi and other places that suffered destruction, foreign staff members of international exchange associations could be seen running about assisting local victims from their own home countries; the Japanese media even reported that Myanmar (Burmese) refugees living in Tokyo and Brazilian groups from Hamamatsu came to the disaster area to serve hot meals for the victims. Furthermore, many Coordinators for International Relations (CIRs) and Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) based in municipalities impacted by the disaster stayed on and became actively involved in relief/recovery efforts. Foreign students, the number of which initially had fallen dramatically, largely returned to normal with the start of the new academic year in April and some of these students established their own volunteer groups to aid the disaster victims.

After the recovery from World War II, Japan as an economic power provided economic and technical assistance to countries throughout Asia and Africa, but now again find ourselves in a position to accept aid from the international community. To recover from such a huge disaster, Japan has to face challenges, such as realizing the economic revival of aging and depopulating local communities, securing new energy sources, and more than anything, containing the nuclear accident and removing radioactive substances. Success in facing these monumental challenges requires a concerted effort on the part of Japan and invaluable cooperation from the international community.

Until now in Japan the term ‘international cooperation,’ has generally been used in reference to assistance offered to developing countries. The “local internationalization” promoted by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications presumes that international exchange and international cooperation are “outward” in nature. However, isn’t it time for us to change our mindset and land become a gracious recipient of assistance? Unfortunately, at present there are very few Japanese experts in international cooperation who have experience on the ‘receiving end’ and the government’s attitude also has been inadequate with contributions from the international community not being utilized to the full potential, and therefore inviting complaints from some foreign countries which have offered help.

As radiation continues to be released from the Fukushima nuclear plant, the international community is still voicing concerns over insufficient information disclosure. TEPCO has only recently acknowledged that there was a reactor core meltdown right after the earthquake, inviting more feelings of despair. The government reportedly will soon establish a panel to study the nuclear accident; shouldn’t foreign experts be included among the members? Furthermore, as I pointed out in last month’s blog entry, the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake Reconstruction Design Council which was established last month and intends to issue its first report by the end of June, does not include even one foreign national. Also, to dispel unfounded rumors and restore confidence in the ‘Japan brand,’ this country needs to show the world that it is not sitting by suffering but in fact is working hard to rebuild; however, the Council’s website contains information in Japanese only.

Messages of solidarity and support continue to be voiced around the world, and new bonds between Japan and many countries are being formed. By creating a comfortable environment that welcomes foreign experts, NGOs, and businesses to work together with us for the reconstruction, isn’t it a rare chance for Japan to build a new society open to the world? For example, how about inviting an international organization with expertise in the field of disaster management cooperation to the Tohoku Region?

Finally, to further international cooperation for the sake of reconstruction, Japan's public and private sectors must work together to convey the state of the country and its needs for support to the world in foreign languages. To this end, tapping the power of foreign residents is necessary. In other words, isn't the key to succeeding in this new attempt at international cooperation in the hands of Japan's foreign residents who can form bridges with their home countries?