

Humanitarian disaster in wake of Japanese earthquake, tsunami

Patrick O'Connor
14 March 2011

The immense scale of the disaster in Japan wrought by Friday's earthquake and tsunami has become clearer in the last two days. The official death toll is now nearly 1,600, but at least 10,000 people are believed to have died and the final tally could be in the tens of thousands. Entire towns on the country's north-east coast were wiped out by the 10-metre high wall of water.

The quake was yesterday estimated by the Japan Meteorological Agency at magnitude 9.0 on the Richter scale, the largest recorded in Japan and the fourth-largest in recorded world history. The earth's axis was jolted by about 25 centimetres and Japan's main island of Honshu was shifted 2.4 metres to the east. Caused by a protracted build-up of pressure between the Pacific and Eurasian tectonic plates, the earthquake saw an enormous uplift in the seafloor, triggering the tsunami responsible for the vast majority of death and destruction. The damage also sparked about 200 fires, including three still burning in the city of Kesenuma, according to the Kyodo news agency.

Horrifying photographs and video footage taken by local people continue to emerge, showing entire buildings as well as vehicles and ships being swept away in the tsunami's waters. The small port town of Minamisanriku is among those entirely destroyed, and about 10,000 residents remain unaccounted for. Sendai, a city of one million people and the capital of the worst-affected Miyagi Prefecture, has suffered extraordinary damage.

About 1.5 million households remain without water supplies and 2.5 million have no power. Overnight temperatures are near-freezing, making the situation even more difficult for survivors, while basic foodstuffs and petrol are in short supply in the affected areas.

Yomiuri Shimbun described the scene at Kesenuma, a city of 76,000 people: "Many wrecked cars and trucks lay amidst heaps of rubble, while broken houses were swept down the Okawa river along the JR train line. The water continued to ebb and flow with waves from the sea. Wood and other debris blanketed the street leading to the city's fish market, making it

impassable at a point near the railway station. A medium-size fishing boat and clumps of dead fish also had washed up there, covered with mud."

Kazuo Chiba, a 65 year-old resident, told the newspaper that he had fled his workplace after the earthquake, but was stuck in a traffic jam just moments before the tsunami struck. He decided to abandon his car and take refuge in a nearby apartment building. "I surely would have died if I hadn't gotten into the apartment," he said. "But I still can't contact my family by mobile phone."

According to the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, almost 600,000 people have been displaced or evacuated.

Many of these are residents near the four nuclear power plants that are at risk of meltdown. The most serious crisis is in the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear complex, 240 kilometres north of Tokyo, which was hit by an explosion on Saturday that destroyed the roof of a reactor building, threatening three reactors with overheating. The plants are venting radioactive gasses to relieve the internal pressure, and up to 190 people have been exposed to radiation. Authorities have distributed iodine tablets, to boost resistance to thyroid cancers in cases of radiation exposure. (See "The implications of the Japanese catastrophe")

Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan said yesterday: "The current situation of the earthquake, tsunami and the nuclear plants is in a way the most severe crisis in the past 65 years since World War II."

Kan has authorised 100,000 Japanese soldiers to assist the civil emergency response. US Navy aircraft carrier Ronald Reagan is anchored off the Sendai coast and is being used as a refuelling centre for Japanese military and coast guard helicopters flying rescue missions in the area and delivering emergency food supplies. World governments have offered money and sent their own rescue crews, but the assistance so far advanced bears no relationship to what is needed.

There are clear signs the Japanese government, already mired in a deep political crisis over the passage of the budget, is unprepared for the immense tasks of managing a simultaneous earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster. Among wide sections of the Japanese population there are suspicions that they are not being given full or accurate information about the state of the country's nuclear facilities.

Local officials in the town of Tomiokamachi, which was evacuated because of the threat posed by the nearby Fukushima nuclear facility, have complained of receiving little assistance. The *Wall Street Journal* reported: "Tomiokamachi was eager for more help, but received only a token visit by two advance Japanese Self Defense Forces members and no help from the central government. Instead, it relied on briefings from Tokyo Electric Power, which owns and operates both plants." Hideo Sato, department head of general affairs for the town, said of the mass evacuation: "We had to do it all by ourselves."

There is an ongoing danger from further aftershocks. Hundreds have struck since Friday, including 30 with a Richter scale magnitude of 6 or higher. The Japan Meteorological Agency has warned there is a 70 percent likelihood of a magnitude 7 tremor in the next three days, and a 50 percent chance in subsequent days. Australian Seismological Centre director Kevin McCue explained: "Normally they [aftershocks] happen within days. The rule of thumb is that you would expect the main aftershock to be one magnitude smaller than the main shock, so you would be expecting a 7.9. That's a monster again in its own right that is capable of producing a tsunami and more damage."

The disaster has triggered an energy crisis throughout Japan. Nuclear plants have provided about 30 percent of the country's energy supplies, but this is likely to plummet with the worst affected facilities badly damaged or destroyed. Japan's oil industry has also been hit—at least five refineries automatically shut down when the earthquake struck and two were damaged, though how badly is not yet known. The country is already the third-largest world oil consumer, but is likely to become much more dependent on imported oil and gas in the coming period.

The Kan government has ordered rolling blackouts of three-hours a day, covering Tokyo and other key areas. According to Kyodo News, Tokyo Electric Power (TEPCO)—which operates the badly damaged Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant—has said the power shortages will last at least until the end of April.

A *World Socialist Web Site* reader described what he called a "silent panic" in Tokyo: "Supermarkets are emptied of necessities such as bottled water, toilet paper, canned food, staples like rice or bread, and many other articles. Gasoline is

scarce throughout eastern Japan, with many stations closed as the tanks dry up, while others sport huge lines of cars waiting for a chance to fill as little as 10 litres, as a lot of places are rationing it. Waiting lists for international flights are fully booked for days in advance, with tourists and visitors shortening their stay and trying to get out of the country as soon as possible."

The electricity shortages will compound the immense economic impact of the earthquake and tsunami. Many of Japan's major industrial enterprises remain suspended. Car manufacturers Toyota, Nissan and Honda are yet to resume operations, Sony has ceased production at six electronic component factories, and Panasonic, Toshiba, Kirin Holdings, Fuji Heavy Industries, GlaxoSmithKline, and Nestlé are among those to have curtailed operations in the disaster affected areas.

The immediate effect on the Japanese economy may not be as great as the 1995 Kobe earthquake, which struck one of the country's central industrial zones and largest ports. The worst-hit area now, northern Miyagi Prefecture, is based around agriculture and timber. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, the area's economic output accounts for about 1.7 percent of Japan's total, less than half that of Kobe.

Beyond the immediate impact on production, however, is the total recovery cost and the expense of any restructuring of the country's energy supply system.

Economists had projected growth of 0.3 percent this quarter, but now another negative figure is expected, following the negative 1.3 percent annualised growth rate recorded for last October-December. The Bank of Japan is expected to inject enormous sums into the economy in an emergency "earthquake budget" today. Its options are extremely limited, however, as official interest rates have long been at near zero levels and public debt is twice total gross domestic product, the largest of all the advanced capitalist economies.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact