

Discontent growing over Japanese government's response to humanitarian disaster

Mike Head
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Anger is mounting among ordinary people in Japan over the Democratic Party government's inadequate response to the earthquake and tsunami disaster, and particularly its failure to provide basic services to the nearly half a million people rendered homeless.

As of last night, more than 21,000 people were dead or missing as a result of the March 11 catastrophe, according to a report by national broadcaster NHK, which cited updated police figures. The number of confirmed dead had risen to 8,805, and the number missing was 12,654, the report said. Of the dead, less than half the bodies had been identified.

Ten days after the emergency began, nearly 240,000 people were still staying in temporary shelters, where many were suffering from shortages of food, water and other essential supplies. More than 1.5 million households had no running water.

Prime Minister Naoto Kan, who has been barely visible during the crisis, yesterday cancelled his first major visit to one of the devastated areas, citing bad weather. Kan had been scheduled to fly by helicopter to Ishinomaki in Miyagi Prefecture for half a day to meet survivors and hold a meeting with mayor Hiroshi Kameyama to listen to requests for help to rebuild the lives of local residents.

Kan has not visited the earthquake zone since the day after the tsunami, when he briefly inspected the stricken Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant, in an initial bid to assure the public that it had shut down safely, and then flew over the region in a helicopter.

In cities, towns and fishing villages for more than 300 kilometres along Japan's north-east coast, the flattened houses, skeletons of buildings and acres of rubble resemble the devastation caused by the US nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in World War II.

While the earthquake was the largest in Japan's history, however, and was followed by one of the tallest tsunami ever recorded, it is increasingly obvious that the impact has been magnified by the government's lack of elementary preparation and its indifference to the plight of the survivors.

Many evacuation centres have been left without heat, electricity, running water and regular meals for days on end, adding to the trauma and distress from the loss of family members and friends.

Officials in Ishinomaki, a city of 164,000 people, told the London-based *Guardian* that shortages and a painfully slow return

of services had led to rising anger at the government and sporadic reports of theft and violent crime. "It's only natural that people get frustrated," said Yoshinori Sato, a spokesman for the city council. "It's because of the stress. People are hungry and frustrated."

The *Guardian* described the situation at one of Ishinomaki's evacuation centres. "In Minato neighbourhood, which was cut off from the centre when a fishing trawler was upended on a bridge, the 500 evacuees sheltering in an elementary school did not get hot food until Saturday night.

"A simple meal of rice, vegetables and miso soup, it was provided by volunteers from a camping enthusiasts' organisation—not the Japanese government ... The evacuees had no food or water for the first three days in the shelter, a state elementary school. Then they graduated to meals made up of a single rice ball or a banana—which they were occasionally directed to share. More food is beginning to arrive, but the shelter now has to stretch to feed the entire neighbourhood of 2,300."

At another shelter in the city of Kesenuma, Kimio Onodera, 45, spoke to the *Los Angeles Times*, listing the shortages: fuel, water, phone service, electricity, kerosene, food. "My biggest anger is when government workers arrive in suits," he added. "I'm a mess; look how we're dressed."

Masahiro Hamaguchi, a 48-year-old municipal official, now homeless and huddling under a thin raincoat in a cold shelter, told the newspaper: "I need something, anything, to warm my body. I have no winter clothing. It was all destroyed."

Hamaguchi recalled the January 1995 Great Hanshin earthquake in Kobe, in which more than 6,000 people died, mostly in working class homes that had not been built to withstand even that 6.8-magnitude quake. "The Japanese government should have learned from the Kobe earthquake that they would need help, but they didn't," he said.

In 1995, the short-lived Socialist Party-led government of Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama came under heavy criticism for not acting quickly enough to save many people, for poorly managing the 1.2 million volunteers who sought to assist, and for initially refusing help from foreign nations. Local hospitals struggled to keep up with demand for medical treatment, with some people being operated on in waiting rooms and corridors.

Despite official and media claims that the lessons of the Kobe disaster had been learned, and emergency response programs

overhauled, the opposite has proven to be the case. From the outset, when the March 11 tsunami overwhelmed the 10-metre sea walls that residents had trusted to protect them, the communications and transport infrastructure broke down and victims were left to fend for themselves.

Even hospitals remain without power and other essential services, further endangering the lives of survivors. An Associated Press report last Sunday drew attention to the situation at Senen General Hospital, which had not had gas, electricity or running water for a week and a half. Power was due to come back on in the neighbourhood later this week, but with the hospital's facilities in ruins, it would stay dark.

The hospital had had about 200 patients when the disaster struck. Older and fragile patients were most vulnerable to the subfreezing temperatures—11 had died during the following 10 days. Takahiro Suzuki, the hospital's chief administrator, told AP: "We take anything we can get, from anybody. I understand that the government is overwhelmed, but it is moving too slowly."

There are growing concerns about the impact on children. Across the disaster zone, about 100,000 were displaced. For many, one or both parents, and siblings, have been killed, homes have been destroyed, and friends and extended family have disappeared.

A Save the Children spokesman, Ian Woolverton, told journalists: "We found children in desperate conditions, huddling around kerosene lamps and wrapped in blankets. They told me about their anxieties, especially ... about radiation." Several children had mentioned the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which they had learned about at school.

Throughout the region, in places such as Minamisanriku and Rikuzentakata, residents are having to contemplate abandoning their coastal towns permanently. Insurance policies in Japan rarely cover earthquake or tsunami damage, and while the government provides minimal income support, it has not announced grants to rebuild homes or businesses.

There are also mounting fears that the government has lied to them about the true extent of the radiation and contamination dangers posed by the ongoing partial meltdown at the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) nuclear power plant at Fukushima. Over recent days, an additional 200,000 people have been evacuated from a 20-kilometre zone around the plant.

Former TEPCO worker, Shinichi Tanaka, one of the 2,000 evacuees temporarily housed at the Saitama Super Arena, a large stadium and concert hall, told journalists: "We have tried to stay calm and waited, keep trusting our government, but now I feel like grabbing the government officials by the scruff of the neck and beating them ... I know this power plant accident was originally caused by natural disaster, but I would say that this accident is a human-generated disaster. It is caused by TEPCO's ego."

Tanaka referred to the fact that the giant private utility company had delayed flooding the reactors with seawater when the cooling functions failed, because it wanted to avoid permanent damage and preserve its investments.

Yesterday, there was fresh evidence that the government, which has left TEPCO in charge of the Fukushima plant, has covered up the magnitude of the health dangers that face the country's population. The government ordered the suspension of shipments

of milk and certain vegetables, including spinach, from four prefectures after abnormal radiation levels were found in the products.

Nevertheless, the government's spokesman, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yukio Edano, again appealed for "calm", claiming that "even if you eat and drink them several times it will not be a health hazard".

The health ministry earlier warned people not to drink the tap water in the village of Iitatemura, 40 kilometres from the Fukushima plant. Sampling had found 965 becquerels per kilogram of radioactive iodine in the water, three times the normal level. Even so, officials insisted that was about one twenty-sixth of the level of a chest X-ray and that the warning was merely "a precaution". Abnormally high levels of radioactive substances were also later detected in seawater 100 metres from the crippled plant, raising fears about the toxic water draining from the frantic efforts to douse the reactors.

Workers were yesterday forced to evacuate from part of the Fukushima facility after grey smoke rose from reactor 3. White smoke later arose from number 2 reactor. Shortly before the crew's evacuation, Prime Minister Kan had said there was "slow but steady progress" in dealing with the atomic crisis.

Before the smoke incidents, the government's nuclear safety agency had said engineers were close to restoring some functions in the control room of reactor number 2, such as temperature and pressure instruments and the air filtering system.

Nuclear experts internationally, however, cautioned that it was too early to say that the crisis had reached a turning point. Of greatest concern remain reactors 3 and 4. Damon Moglen from Friends of the Earth told last night's "Four Corners" program on Australian television that unit 3 held about a quarter tonne of highly radioactive plutonium, while former nuclear plant manager Tony Irwin said reactor 4's 548 stored fuel rods contained about 98 tonnes of uranium.



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