Japan’s tsunami victims left struggling to cope

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Japan’s chief cabinet secretary, Yukio Edano, last Thursday told the media that he and other senior officials, who have been wearing blue jackets similar to factory workers since the March 11 earthquake, were considering changing back to regular business suits because Japan was returning to “normal”.

For tens of thousands of people in northeastern Japan, however, who have lost homes, jobs and loved ones, and many of whom live in fear of radiation poisoning from the crippled Fukushima nuclear reactors, the disaster is far from over.

The earthquake and resultant tsunami have left more than 27,000 dead or officially missing. About a quarter of a million survivors who have lost their homes are housed in 2,000 evacuation centres. Some are even living in their own cars, according to the United Nations.

While the building of temporary housing has started in the affected prefectures, the program is far from enough to meet the huge demand. The Japanese government had secured building sites for only 2,600 housing units as of last week, far less than the 50,000 needed.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported last week that aid workers had warned of the urgency of providing housing. Although the initial shortages of food had improved somewhat, the evacuation centres lacked privacy and were often difficult to heat. The newspaper noted: “Some are located in cavernous gymnasiums with only space heaters to keep people warm, even as temperatures outside drop to as low as 6-minus degree Celsius. Colds and flus are spreading rapidly, aid workers say.”

The Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government has asked the Tokyo-based Japan Prefabricated Construction Supplies and Manufacturers Association to take orders from local governments to build temporary houses, at a cost of 5 million yen ($US61,000) each. This reliance on private companies means that the severely-affected prefectural governments will have to pay the costs first, before they are reimbursed by Tokyo.

A case in point is the seaside city of Natori, where more than 500 people were killed, and thousands are still missing. About 2,000 people are living in evacuation centres based in schools or government buildings. Yet, the local authorities can only plan to build 100 temporary homes initially. Local officials admitted that these homes were not enough, but said they had to cope with the limited financial resources and had to meet other urgent needs, such as restarting power and water supplies. The city authority had considered renting empty apartments for the displaced, but most apartments had already been quickly snapped up by those who still had money after the tsunami.

While the two-bed room temporary homes to be constructed will be free for tsunami refugees, they must pay for the utilities, adding to their financial hardships.

Anger and frustration are widespread among the victims living in the evacuation centres in Natori. Yukitaka Aizawa, a photographer who lost his home, told the *Wall Street Journal* that no one from the city government had visited them for two weeks, and he had to share a small room with his mother, wife, a cousin, an aunt and several others, in a cultural centre. The so-called rooms had walls of blankets and cardboard. While there food and water was now available, Aizawa had to take his mother to a friend’s house to bathe. He expressed frustration, saying: “I guess we may have to make some kind of delegation to represent victims and go to City Hall.”

Small scale protests have erupted in Tokyo in recent weeks over the lack of aid to the tsunami victims and the government’s continuing commitment to nuclear energy. There are concerns in ruling circles that unrest could deepen

because of rising unemployment, as the quake has disrupted production not only in the worst-hit areas but in many factories across Japan.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported on April 1 that a new line had formed at the city hall of Yamamoto Town, a coastal community. People were queuing to look for jobs alongside long lines of residents seeking government aid and access to working phones.

Most of the 800,000 people who work in the three worst-affected prefectures—Miyagi, Fukushima and Iwate—have had their livelihoods affected, the UN reported last Wednesday, citing Japanese government reports. By that time, about 23,000 people had gone to local employment offices to inquire about job opportunities and unemployment benefits, it said.

According to another report, labour authorities in the three hardest-hit prefectures have received around 150 calls from companies and new graduates about the cancellation of job offers or delays in employment. Companies, often required by law to take on a specific number of new employees each year, have contacted authorities to explain their current difficulties in recruiting.

"In the past, companies were reluctant to hire people because of the economic slump," Iwate Labour Department official Yasuo Chikugo, said, referring to Japan's two-decade period of stagnation. "Now some of the companies themselves have disappeared. There are tough times ahead for new graduates."

Young people are being the hardest hit, alongside workers in irregular employment. In Chiba, which is part of the Greater Tokyo Area, the National Railway Motive Power Union reported that large numbers of casual workers had been "thrown out of daily work without any assurance or allowance". The union added: "The number of possible jobless people is beyond assessment. No rescue measures are being offered or planned for those jobless workers."

Hisashi Yamada, chief economist at the Japan Research Institute, an arm of the Sumitomo Mitsui Financial Group, last week told the *Wall Street Journal*: "In the worst case, there's a risk that the jobless rate may climb close to its record high" of 5.5 percent, set in July 2009, during the onset of the global financial crisis.

The combined earthquake and radiation emergencies have exacerbated the social and economic malaise in rural areas that have long been neglected by successive governments in Tokyo. In the city of Rikuzentakata in Iwate prefecture, where at least 1,800 were dead or missing, Reuters journalist Toko Kubota reported that the decline in population would intensify as more young people were unable to find jobs.

Northeast Japan once supplied one-fifth of the country's rice, the production of which was heavily subsidised by the government during the post-World War II period. Now, Kubota wrote, "farming has become a part-time occupation in many areas, and fishermen have been crowded out by more efficient factory ships." Data from the farming ministry showed that the number of farming households in the northeast had fallen by 30 percent between 1985 and 2005. In 2005, nearly a third of the farmers were 65 or over compared with a national average for farmers of 17 percent.

Public work projects, financed by Tokyo through stimulus packages after the collapse of property and stock bubbles in early 1990s, no longer existed. A tsunami survivor, Tsuneo Onodera, told Reuters: "Farming is not sufficient to make a living, so people used to work in construction in the summer. Then the public works stopped coming and we started having trouble with our livelihoods."

There is a widespread hope that "reconstruction" will bring jobs back and even re-start the Japanese economy. However, local governments, like that in Rikuzentakata, had heavy debts even before the March 11 catastrophe, as did the national government, placing severe limits on their capacity to borrow to rebuild.

The economic cost of the disaster—estimated at $300 billion—is three times greater than the 1995 Kobe earthquake, when public debt accounted for 50 percent of Japan's gross domestic product. Today, that figure exceeds 220 percent. Weeks before the quake, Standard & Poor's had cut Japan's credit rating to just one notch below Spain—one of the European countries engulfed by the global sovereign debt crisis.