

Japan: Six months after the triple disaster

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Yesterday marked six months since an earthquake measuring 9 on the Richter scale and the associated tsunami devastated Japan's north-eastern region known as Tohoku. The tsunami overwhelmed the limited seawall around the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear plant, knocking out all its power supplies and triggering the world's worst nuclear crisis since the meltdown of the Chernobyl reactor in the Ukraine in 1986.

The quake and tsunami laid waste to whole towns and villages—nearly 16,000 people are confirmed dead and more than 4,000 are still missing, presumed dead. The scenes of devastation brought to mind the pictures from Aceh in Indonesia following the 2004 tsunami that also wiped-out parts of Sri Lanka, India and Thailand. Around 100,000 houses were destroyed and another 500,000 damaged in the Tohoku region.

As in the aftermath of the Asian tsunami, tens of thousands of people in Japan are still living in temporary accommodation, trying to rebuild their lives with little assistance. The government has pushed two reconstruction packages through parliament—one in May of 4 trillion yen (\$US50 billion) and a second in July of 2 trillion yen. According to the conservative estimate of Japan's Cabinet Office, however, the total damage bill is at least 17 trillion yen.

The disaster has been greatly compounded by the ongoing nuclear crisis at the Fukushima plant. The power cut-off on March 11 shut down reactor cooling systems, leading to a partial meltdown in three of the plant's six reactors. Hydrogen explosions badly damaged reactor buildings and created havoc for engineers and workers desperately seeking to bring the reactors under control.

Former Prime Minister Naoto Kan admitted in an interview last week with the *Tokyo Shimbun* that he feared at the time that Tokyo could have been rendered uninhabitable if the nuclear crisis was not controlled. "Deserted scenes of Tokyo without a single man around came across my mind,"

he said. "It really was a spine-chilling thought." Tokyo is 220 kilometres southwest of the Fukushima plant.

Kan was forced to resign on August 26, in large part because of widespread popular hostility and distrust of his government's handling of the nuclear disaster. The prime minister left the plant's operator—Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO)—in charge of the emergency, even though the corporation is notorious for its breaches of safety. TEPCO's concern to salvage its investment may have led to critical delays in using sea water to cool the reactor cores.

From the outset, Japan's nuclear regulatory agencies—the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency (NISA) and the Nuclear Safety Commission (NSC)—downplayed the extent of the disaster. It was only in mid-April that they elevated the severity ranking of the nuclear catastrophe from 5 to 7—the most serious level on the International Nuclear and Radiological Event Scale (INES)—putting it on a par with Chernobyl.

Six months later, the three damaged reactors are still not in a state of cold shutdown and are continuing to release radioactive material. Water is still being pumped into the reactor cores to stabilise their temperatures, leading to an accumulation of huge quantities of highly radioactive water. The three reactors are still too hot and unstable to begin the difficult task of locating and removing the nuclear fuel that melted during the height of the crisis. Full decommissioning of the reactors could take a decade.

Between 80,000 and 100,000 people have been forced to move out of the 20-kilometre exclusion zone around the Fukushima plant and several other areas. Many are living in temporary accommodation, with no idea if or when they will be allowed to return. In late August, Kan told the Fukushima governor: "I can't deny the possibility that it could be a long time before people can return to and live in regions with high radiation levels." The cost of decontamination has been estimated at 10 trillion yen (\$US130 billion). Some areas may be uninhabitable for decades.

The impact has been devastating for the Fukushima Prefecture, with more than 55,000 people moving out of the area altogether. Those receiving employment insurance benefits nearly doubled to 23,862 in July from a year earlier. Industrial output has dropped sharply and tourist numbers have plunged. To those forced to evacuate and who have lost their homes, jobs and businesses, TEPCO has paid a pittance in initial compensation—one million yen (\$US12,000) per family.

The government has ignored concerns raised by scientists and calls for a wider exclusion zone. It angered parents throughout the region by lifting the “safe” level of radiation for school children to an annual limit of 20 millisieverts—the same limit as for a nuclear worker in Germany. The government also raised the annual limit for nuclear workers from 100 to 250 millisieverts.

Uncertainty, distrust and suspicion are widespread. As a *Guardian* article last Friday explained: “Each day for most of the past six months, there has been a steady drip, drip, drip of worrying news: caesium found in the breast milk of seven mothers; strontium discovered inside the city limits; 45 percent of children in one survey testing positive for thyroid exposure. There are reports of suicides by desperate farmers and lonely evacuees, contaminated beef being smuggled on to the market, and warnings that this autumn’s rice crop may have to be abandoned.”

Such is the hostility that Trade and Industry Yoshio Hachiro has been forced to resign—just one week after taking office. His insensitive comments last week describing the evacuated areas around the Fukushima plant as “dead towns” and a joke with reporters about radioactive contamination provoked immediate and widespread outrage. The remarks were doubly galling as Hachiro headed the powerful Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry that was notorious for its cosy relations with the nuclear industry, which it both promoted and regulated.

Yesterday, anti-nuclear protests took place in Tokyo and several other cities to mark six months since the earthquake. The largest—of about 2,500—was in the capital, where demonstrators formed a human chain around the TEPCO headquarters and called for a complete shutdown of nuclear power plants across Japan. Only 12 of the country’s 54 nuclear reactors are currently operational due to local opposition to restarting those shut down for regular inspection or other reasons.

Six months after the triple disaster it is working people who are bearing the brunt throughout the affected areas of the Tohoku region. While the government has assisted TEPCO to survive and other corporations to recover, small businesses, farmers and fishermen are in deep financial strife—already in debt and needing new loans. As a result of the so-called “double-loan” problem, an estimated 20,000 individuals are at risk of bankruptcy.

A recent survey reported in the *Yomiuri Shimbun* found that 26 of 42 mayors of cities and towns in the tsunami-hit prefectures of Iwate, Miyagi and Fukushima had little or no idea when recovery from the disaster would be completed. The government estimates that at least 70,000 people lost their jobs as a result of the catastrophe, but other analysts insist that the actual figure is much higher.

An article in the *Australian* described the present scene in the town of Otsuchi: “Debris is still piled in great mounds along the waterfront; gutted buildings still dot the low-lying areas of this fishing village, where more than one in 10 of the town’s 15,000 residents were killed.” It continued: “In contrast to Otsuchi, neighbouring Kamaishi, according to locals, is far ahead in terms of its clean-up and rehousing efforts. It’s aided by the presence of industrial giant Nippon Steel, which resumed operations at its mill and helped the town recover.”

Unlike Indonesia, Japan is an advanced industrial country—the world’s third largest economy. But the lack of adequate warning and safety measures, the slow response of Japanese authorities and the inadequate funding of recovery and reconstruction bear striking similarities. Just as in tsunami-hit Aceh, the impact of the triple disaster in the Tohoku region has been greatly compounded by the dictates of the capitalist system, which subordinates every aspect of the lives of working people to the profit requirements of the wealthy few.



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