

One year since Japan's triple disaster

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13 March 2012

Last Sunday marked one year since a catastrophic earthquake and tsunami hit Japan devastating much of coastal areas of the north-eastern Tohoku region and triggering an acute crisis at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant.

The magnitude-9 earthquake on March 11, 2011 was followed by a 10- to 14-metre tsunami leaving nearly 20,000 people dead or missing, demolishing 128,500 homes and other buildings, and rendering about 350,000 people homeless. Entire towns were flattened. Nearly one million buildings were damaged and basic infrastructure destroyed up to five kilometres inland.

While the uncontrollable natural forces were at work, the scale of the disaster was magnified by inadequate government emergency preparation and, in the case of the nuclear plant, by the subordination of safety issues to private profit. The plight of the survivors has been magnified by the lack of sufficient funds for the reconstruction and aid.

Nearly 330,000 people remain in temporary housing, most having spent months previously living in rudimentary evacuation centres such as school halls. Reconstruction of towns and villages has only just begun. Much of the 22.5-million tonnes of debris has not been cleared. Human remains are still being discovered, adding to the distress of families that have had to push the authorities to keep searching for the bodies.

Reporting for the *Financial Times* from Rikuzentakata, one of the towns largely demolished, Mure Dickie described the scene as "still post-apocalyptic": "Neighbourhoods of wooden homes have disappeared, leaving only foundations." Similar scenes were common along hundreds of kilometres of coast, the journalist noted, "fuelling frustration at the pace of reconstruction."

A formal Reconstruction Agency with its own minister

only opened a month ago. Government recovery funding, totalling 20.5 trillion yen (\$US250 billion), is much less than what is required to rebuild the affected communities.

Across the Tohoku region, which had already been suffering from a long-term economic decline, the disaster has accelerated an exodus, especially among young people. For instance, Onagawa, a tsunami-ravaged town, has lost 20 percent of its population.

In the Fukushima prefecture, more than 80,000 residents forced to leave the exclusion zone around the crippled Daiichi plant have been told that it could be decades before they can return. After six months of cover-up, the authorities finally admitted that Fukushima was the world's worst nuclear crisis since the meltdown of the Chernobyl reactor in the Ukraine in 1986.

Radiation levels remain unsafe near the Daiichi plant. In Okuma, a town close to the plant's perimeter, readings are at 35 microsieverts/hour compared to the normal background level of 0.2-0.3. Areas of the plant are still too dangerous for workers to enter, with parts of reactor 3 registering up to 1,500 microsieverts/hour.

In December, the interiors of the three damaged reactors finally cooled to below the boiling point of water—a state known as cold shutdown. But the operation to remove melted nuclear fuel from the reactors will take many years to complete.

Evidence is still emerging of the extent of the cover-up by the government and the giant Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), the Fukushima plant operator, of the radiation dangers, official panic, in-fighting and chaos that existed throughout the response to the nuclear emergency.

A privately-funded investigation reported last month that the government, then led by Prime Minister Naoto

Kan, feared a “demonic chain reaction” of nuclear meltdowns. It secretly considered plans to evacuate the 30 million people in Greater Tokyo—220 kilometres from Fukushima—but deliberately kept the public in the dark. The Rebuild Japan Initiative Foundation report said TEPCO had been “negligent” in its disaster preparations and government regulators had “failed in their supervision.”

Despite its culpability, TEPCO is being bailed out the government to the tune of 1 trillion yen, on top of the billions of yen paid to cover compensation and clean-up costs. Because the company’s market value has shrunk by about 90 percent, the government’s investment would give it roughly a two-thirds stake in the company. But TEPCO management is reportedly demanding that the government’s voting rights be limited to less than 50 percent.

Assurances of safety by the government and the power companies have failed to overcome the popular distrust that has led to the closure of all but two of Japan’s 54 reactors. One symptom of the distrust is the frequent sight of people, particularly parents of school children, using their own Geiger counters to detect radiation.

Despite Japan’s quake-prone location, successive governments encouraged the extensive use of nuclear power to the point where the economy relied on it for nearly a third of its needs. Yet, there was no planning for the 1-in-1,000-year shock that hit last year.

Scientists have warned that an even greater disaster would occur if a similar-sized seismic shock hit further south, in the Tokyo-Nagoya-Osaka region. The government has revealed that emergency planning in that area is based on a quake of only magnitude 7.3—the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, which killed more than 100,000 people in and around Tokyo, measured 7.9.

Japan’s economy, already mired in a protracted slump before the triple disaster, contracted at an annualised rate of 6.8 percent during the first quarter of 2011, and 0.7 percent for the year. Reconstruction spending is forecast to raise growth to an anaemic 2 percent this year, but that prediction is being undermined by recessionary trends in Europe and the US. Rebuilding will also worsen the government debt, now expected to grow to 227 percent of gross domestic product by 2013.

Nomura Securities chief economist Takahide Kiuchi told the *Wall Street Journal*: “We are seeing positive effects of reconstruction on the economy right now but they won’t last for a long time. Japan’s economy could well be in worse shape than before the disasters, once reconstruction demand dissipates.”

Many thousands of livelihoods—jobs, farms, fishing and small businesses—have yet to recover, and may never be restored. Small and medium-sized businesses face bankruptcy because banks have refused to lend for them to rebuild damaged plants and offices. According to business organisations, 3,535 companies lost entire buildings or factories in the disaster.

Politically, there has been a profound loss of faith in the major parties and corporate establishment, compounding the public alienation that had grown over previous decades. Kan’s inadequate response to the catastrophe was a major factor in his removal as prime minister last August. He had left TEPCO in charge of the nuclear emergency, even though the corporation was notorious for its breaches of safety.

A year after the triple disaster, its tragic consequences continue to demonstrate the failure of the profit system to address even the most basic needs of working people.



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