

**The Great Tohoku Earthquake of 2011:  
Understanding the Japanese Government's Sluggish Response**

**By**

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**For**

**InterAction's  
*Monday Developments Magazine***

**Submitted May 17, 2011**

## **Introduction**

The international community's prompt humanitarian response to the Great Tohoku Earthquake of March 11, 2011, has been most admirable, and the Japanese government and people greatly appreciate this assistance. It is the first time in history that the Japanese government actually invited international assistance. Not even after Japan's crushing and demoralizing defeat at the end of World War II, even in the face of starvation and rampant disease, did Japan look beyond its home islands for help. But no longer does Japan's post World War II generation consider their nation an "island" separate from the global community. For decades, the Japanese government has funded humanitarian relief efforts around the world, and Japan's private Non-profit Organizations (NPO) sent eager volunteers to erase illiteracy, disease and starvation.

But now it is Japan's turn to receive even as the Japanese government readies to rebuild northeast Japan. Although the most urgent needs are subsiding, America's NGOs still can be of invaluable assistance to the people of Japan. Explored here is a preliminary assessment of factors that defined the Japanese government and private NPO's responses to the most recent natural disaster, and some suggestions about how the next response can be improved prior to the next inevitable natural disaster, be it a typhoon, volcanic eruption, earthquake and/or tsunami.

## **The Great Tohoku Earthquake and Tsunami of 2011**

The events of March 11, 2011 are a consequence of natural forces that date from millions of years ago, and, unfortunately, it is Japan's fate that similar events will occur in the future. Millions of years ago, the ancestors of modern Japan's islands separated from what is now the Korean Peninsula and ever since have slowly drifted eastward toward North America. The March 11 earthquake was but the most recent chapter in this continuing natural saga. Actually the northern third of Japan's main island, Honshu, has experienced two similarly destructive events during the previous century, once at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and again in 1936. Unfortunately few Japanese high schools teach the history of modern Japan so recollections of these events, and lessons learned from them, have waned with time.

The Great Tohoku Earthquake of 2011, a world record setting magnitude 9, caused more than physical damage. Its psychological consequences will linger long in the minds of the people of Japan, not to mention many in the world community. Modern technology is partially responsible for the disaster's global impact. NHK, Japan's national television network, and other Japanese television networks promptly dispatched helicopters shortly after the 9.0 magnitude earthquake violently shook northeast Japan from Tokyo northward. Live television pictures of the massive, 500 kilometer long tsunami that measured from nine to 30 meters in height (30 to 100 feet) showed the full horror as nature's awesome power as the ocean rushed upwards of six kilometers (about 4 miles) across farm land, fishing villages and cities, killing and smashing everything in its path. Four of Japan's nuclear reactors at Fukushima, located about mid-point between Tokyo in the south and Sendai city in the north, also sustained significant damage. The vicinity of Tokyo and the prefectures of Akita and Yamagata on Honshu's northwest coast, were also rattled by powerful earthquakes measuring from about magnitude six around Tokyo to magnitude 7 in Akita. Fortunately, there was no tsunami in these areas.

Violent tremors continued for more than a month. Within an hour of the initial tremor, a second so-called “aftershock” measuring a magnitude of 7.5 struck the same area. During the next week, three aftershocks measuring magnitude 7.0 and 48 measuring between magnitude 6.0 and 6.9 continued to rattle Tohoku. The Great Tohoku Earthquake was a series, not a single powerful tremor.

### **The View Within Japan**

The stories survivors tell are themselves unnerving. The most horrifying stories are told by those who fled the tsunami, watched it roar across their towns or even filmed from their cars as they fled toward higher ground. Students in a school yard were preparing to evacuate when the tsunami reached them. Most were able to climb to the top of their sturdy, four story high concrete school, but some were swept away. A husband saw his wife’s hand slip out of his and she disappeared beneath the black water. A television crew was filming from atop a hospital when survivors yelled for help. Unbelievably an elderly woman was freed from a damaged car half buried beneath mud and debris.

In Sendai, Tohoku’s largest city and Miyagi prefecture’s capital, was the closest urban area to the epicenter which was located about 150 kilometers due east of the city in the Pacific Ocean. There the Jiji News Service’s bureau chief, a long time friend, told me of the horror and fear he experienced during the earthquake and then as he helplessly watched the tsunami. He stayed at his desk for many days, enduring cold without heat and subsisting on minimal food and water, determined to ensure that the world learn the full impact of the human suffering and physical devastation.

In Tokyo, a colleague waited for the next subway train from Shibuya to Shinjuku Station when the floor began to heave up and down, the pillars swayed from side to side and even the subway cars rocked side to side. After two minutes, the quaking subsided and people evacuated from the station. Amazingly, no one was injured and there was no serious damage to the station. But it took almost eight hours to reach his family in Shinjuku, usually a ten minute subway or train ride.

The earthquake, although its epicenter was two hundred miles to the east, severely rattled Akita prefecture’s capital city. At Akita International University in Akita city’s eastern suburb, the school’s vice president first felt gentle shaking, not unusual in earthquake prone Japan. But the longer he waited for the shaking to cease, the more violent it became. After a minute, he dove under his desk. He felt his life would soon end, and he was overcome by intense fear. Even after the shaking had stopped, the fear continued as he awaited aftershocks.

Since March 11, more than 700 aftershocks have struck northern Honshu from Tokyo northward. “Aftershocks” is a misnomer. Each of these is in fact an earthquake. All have been of a magnitude lower than March 11, but more than 30 have been nearly as severe as the earthquake that devastated Haiti in 2010 and the one that wrecked havoc in central China the year earlier. One of the most intense aftershocks 7.4 magnitude, hit Akita the night of April 7. At 11:32 PM, the floor of my two story house began vibrating up and down, then undulating as if on a wave.

As the quake intensified, the walls of the house swayed from side to side. I stood in the outer corner of the house, my back to the wall (in the event that the house collapsed, it would be easier to escape from the corner rather than an interior doorway.) But the worst was yet to come. Suddenly the shaking and swaying became almost violent. It took all my strength to remain on my feet. After two minutes, the quake subsided. It was a cold night and the electricity had gone off. The next day I learned from the local government that not a single person had died or been injured in an “aftershock” that exceeded in magnitude the quake that devastated Haiti in 2010. This was but one “aftershock” of the more than 700 to have occurred during the previous month.

### **Fukushima’s Nuclear Disaster**

Fukushima, the name of a prefecture located mid-point between Sendai city in the north and Tokyo in the south, has now become synonymous with the world’s other major nuclear disasters – Chernobyl in the Ukraine and Three Mile Island in the United States. Natural forces, particularly the March 11 tsunami set the stage for a disaster but human folly exaggerated the intensity and scope of the disaster.

One of Japan’s largest utility companies, Tokyo Electric Power Company or TEPCO as it is commonly called, in the 1970s built four nuclear reactors side by side on the Pacific coast of Honshu to supply electricity to Tokyo. By 2010, Japan’s Nuclear Safety Agency designated these aging reactors for de-commissioning beginning in 2011. But TEPCO petitioned and was allowed in January 2011 to continue operating the four reactors for another ten years. Then the tsunami struck on March 11, shutting down the reactors and severely damaging auxiliary facilities. The reactors ceasing generating electricity needed to operate pumps that would supply cooling water to the reactors and the spent nuclear fuel stored within each building that housed a reactor. Amazingly, all the back-up generating systems failed, halting the supply of cooling water to the reactors and the spent fuel ponds.

TEPCO’s initial response was consistent with its normal procedures – hide the truth and scuffle internally to deal with the situation. Over the past ten years, several severe nuclear incidents at TEPCO’s nuclear power plants, have earned it an extremely poor safety record. After seventeen hours of futile effort, TEPCO failed to restart its back up generators, spent nuclear fuel in the cooling ponds overheated, formed highly radioactive hydrogen and one after another, the reactor building’s roofs blew off, venting highly radioactive steam and debris into the atmosphere. As winds spread the radioactivity inland over inhabited areas, radioactive water began to leak into the ocean.

Amazingly, TEPCO representatives repeatedly assured the government and public that there was no danger to the public. Finally the Director General of the United Nations International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Mr. Amano, a former Japanese government official, visited the Japanese Prime Minister Kan and convinced him that a nuclear disaster was in the making at Fukushima. Only then did the Japanese government step forward to begin managing the situation. But by that time, severe damage had already occurred at the nuclear power plants and in the vicinity around the plants.

Slowly it is becoming clear that TEPCO did not so much intentionally mislead the government and public about the situation's severity, but neglected to reveal everything it knew and also failed to gather more crucial data needed to determine what was happening both within and beyond the nuclear reactor site.

TEPCO had failed to reveal that the tsunami had destroyed most of its radioactivity monitoring equipment positioned near the reactor sites. The company's reassuring public statements about limited and declining radiation levels was based on measurements taken as TEPCO employees drove to various locations near the reactors using small radiation measuring equipment to determine radiation levels.

Even more stunting was the revelation that the company was sending its technicians into the nuclear reactor facilities wearing nothing more than a helmet, flimsy mask, and white overalls. Only one of several employees in a team had the equipment needed to measure radiation exposure levels – an appalling disregard for the safety of its employees. In short, TEPCO could honestly claim that radiation levels after the nuclear reactor buildings had exploded did not present a threat to human health, but this claim was based on data of minimal validity.

### **The Toll of Nature's Power and Man's Folly**

The human toll continues to mount. As of late April, at least 14,000 persons have been confirmed dead and an equal number or more remain missing. The number of injured is still being tallied. A small number of TEPCO employees have been exposed to high levels of radiation, but thus far none appear to have suffered long term damage to their health. But it is most likely too early to be able to determine the ultimate impact of the Fukushima disaster on human health.

Economically, the Great Tohoku Earthquake has disrupted upwards of 20% of Japan's manufacturing and agricultural production as well as its fishing output. The shutting down of the nuclear power plants at Fukushima have reduced Japan's electricity supply by an estimated 20%, further disrupting manufacturing, etc. Current estimates indicate that these disruptions are temporary and most likely will subside over the next six to twelve months. In the case of damage to farmland and fishing caused by radioactivity vented at the Fukushima nuclear power plants, the economic consequences could continue for much longer, but would be limited to a relatively small area of Japan and its economy.

Possibly the most severe and longest lasting consequence will be the tremendous psychological damage to the Japan's people. Death has ripped apart families. Thousands are certain to endure post traumatic stress. All the victims have lost their homes, physical possessions, even livelihood. But the physical and psychological damage extends far beyond the earthquake and tsunami ravaged areas.

Not since Japan's humiliating defeat at the end of World War II has the Japanese people's confidence in their government been so drastically jarred. To rebuild Japan and the Japanese people's confidence in their government, Japan's post World War II leadership turned to technology as a key to speedy reconstruction and the restoration of prosperity. This accent on technology nurtured Japan's electronics industry, the bullet train, Tokyo's skyscrapers, multitude

of nuclear power plants that produce low cost green electricity, not to mention its impressive earthquake and tsunami warning systems. But now the tsunami and Fukushima fiasco have also undermined the Japanese people's confidence in the ability of modern technology to guarantee their future prosperity and safety. Massive steel reinforced concrete walls failed to prevent the ocean from sweeping away kinsmen, homes, work place, schools and hospitals. The Japanese people were stunned to learn that in a nation that prides itself in building robots to build cars and as toys, robots had to be brought from the United States to safely explore the interiors of the damaged Fukushima nuclear power plants. In a nation that excels in the invention of electronic gadgets, TEPCO workers were not equipped with the electronic gadgets that monitor exposure to radioactivity.

The Japanese government's response to the earthquake and tsunami appeared sluggish at best. As survivors huddled in unheated school gymnasium and survived on small amounts of food purchased at the few scattered food stores still open, the government struggled to send food, blankets, any basic needs to the victims for at least three days, but in many cases over a longer period.

Here we explore the reasons for this apparently inept response to the worst natural disaster to strike Japan since 1945. Clearly the reasons had nothing to do with a lack of compassion or concern on the part of the Japanese people, their government and the international community.

### **The Initial Response – Why so Sluggish?**

The events of March 11 understandably stunned the entire world, particularly the people of Japan directly affected. A reassuring fact is that Japan's nationwide earthquake warning system worked admirably on March 11, 2011. When the strongest earthquake ever recorded for Japan struck, an alarm is automatically sounded on mobile telephones, radio and television. People are promptly informed of the tremors location and magnitude. Speeding bullet trains, regular trains and subways are brought to a stop, power stations, including nuclear power stations, automatically shut down.

Nevertheless, survivors have had to experience the full range of human emotion from horror followed by trauma, relief at being alive only to realize that family members and friends had died or were in a state of severe distress, and eventually frustration and anger. Japan's central government headed by Prime Minister Kan and his cabinet become the focus of intense anxiety, frustration and anger.

While survivors huddled in unheated and often damaged schools, they endured long cold and dark nights with little or no food or water. Medicine and medical aid was virtually non-existent. Thousands gathered on hillsides and roof tops awaiting rescue. As they waited, some of the elderly, the ill and injured died awaiting aid. Others died of exposure to the cold or drown in the Pacific Ocean. Most had to wait at least three days, in many cases much longer for the central government to organize and dispatch assistance. Only now, six weeks later, are survivors beginning to ask why.

In the vicinity of the damaged Fukushima nuclear power plants, people were told for many days that their health was not at risk because of radiation leaking from the plants. Nearby residents were merely told to stay indoors, something very difficult for farmers needing to ready their fields for the spring planting and fishermen needing to venture out to catch fish. First came announcements that the Tokyo area's drinking water showed indications of rising radiation levels and people were told to give babies only bottled water. A rush on bottled water ensued. Then spinach harvested in Fukushima prefecture was ban from sale because of radiation. More than one month after explosions at the Fukushima plants had vented large amounts of radioactive debris and vapors into the atmosphere did the government finally establish an exclusion zone around the reactors. In short, the radiation from the damaged plants was in fact a threat to human health. Ever since farmers have seen their pets and dairy cows starve, and farm fields become wastelands. Similarly, a large volume of radioactive water leaked into the Pacific Ocean, requiring the government to reluctantly establish a no fishing zone. Again, people are asking why their government has dealt with the situation in such a slow and haphazard manner.

The answers have much to do with history and political culture, nothing to do with the lack of human compassion and concern. Unfortunately, there are some in Japan who wish to politicize the government's hesitant response, an endeavor unlikely to yield any substantial benefits to the Japanese people.

### **Emergency Planning**

The response to the earthquakes and tsunami are primarily a consequence of Japan's long established plans for dealing with natural disasters. Traditionally, responsibility for emergency planning is divided between local village and municipalities, prefectural and the central government. Local government authorities have primary responsibility. They develop the plans, build and maintain shelters, and take other measures to minimize nature's damage from typhoon's, earthquakes and tsunami.

All of the affected communities along Tohoku's Pacific coast retain the traditional characteristics of an agrarian society dependent on agriculture and fishing. Over the past century they have struck a compromise with the more modern elements of Japanese society as represented by prefecture and central governments. This compromise allows local municipalities (clusters of small towns and villages gathered under a single administrative umbrella) to handle their own affairs in exchange for paying taxes to the prefecture and national government, accommodating national utility and road infrastructure, etc.

Each municipality, headed by an elected mayor, is therefore responsible for its own disaster plan, shelters, etc. Most communities shared the same assumptions when planning for disasters. They assumed the disaster would be short term such as a typhoon passing over the area during a single day, or an earthquake which might last a minute. As for earthquakes, most communities in Japan have adopted and strictly enforced rigorous building codes. After all, the best safe haven from an earthquake is a sturdy structure. Local "city" halls, police and fire stations, and schools are usually designated shelters in the event of a typhoon or earthquake. Thus their construction is particularly sturdy.

Emergency planning regarding tsunami would appear to be similarly impressive. All coastal communities are linked to a nationally maintained tsunami warning system that consists of technologically advanced detectors anchored in the ocean. Once a tsunami is indicated, sirens in the threatened coastal area sound. Municipalities regularly conduct drills to familiarize people with the alarm system, evacuation routes and location of shelters. Several communities have built, at tremendous expense, high steel reinforced concrete sea walls designed to minimize a tsunami's impact. On March 11, the earthquake warning system worked as did the tsunami warning system, but still tens of thousands of people died. Why?

### *The Price for Ignoring History*

One glaring oversight in emergency planning has been the failure to review history. At least twice before during the past century, huge tsunamis have devastated Japan's northeast coast. But the history of modern Japan is not studied in Japanese schools. The period between 1868, the beginning of Japan's "modernization," and 1945, the year of Japan's defeat at the end of World War II is a blank. In a society that cherishes the avoidance of inter-personal friction, contentious issues such as this period of Japanese history are simply ignored.

One Japanese tsunami expert appeared on national television and told how he had learned from the study of history that enormous tsunamis had since the 9<sup>th</sup> Century struck Japan's northeast Pacific Coast. The reason for his was to determine whether locating six nuclear power stations on the coast was appropriate. He determined that the historical record demonstrated it was not because over the centuries, tsunamis exceeding 30 meters (100 feet) had devastated the coast line. But confidence in Japan's technology appears to have overruled his and other scientists' concerns. Municipalities and Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) determined Japan's technology could match nature's power.

### *No Zoning Regulations*

A visit to any devastated community quickly confirms that there are no zoning regulations that govern the placement of buildings. Commercial and residential structures are freely intermixed. Despite earlier warnings from tsunami experts, shelters such as government office buildings, police and fire stations, hospitals and schools were constructed over the past half century without regard for their vulnerability to a massive tsunami. Again, local government authorities placed their confidence in scientifically designed construction plans, not in zoning regulations that could cause considerable friction within each community as to where people could work and live.

Traditions, historical and cultural, contributed significantly to magnifying the devastating impact of the March 11 tsunami which in turn directly blunted the government's ability to respond promptly and effectively. Once the tsunami had struck, local officials and others responsible for community emergency plan implementation had themselves become victims of the disaster. Many of these small communities' best trained emergency professionals, such as police and firemen, doctors and nurses, and teachers were dead, injured, or too traumatized to function effectively. In many places, police were swept away by the tsunami as they attempted to warn of its coming. Firemen died trying to shut gates in the community's tsunami barrier or while manning emergency alarm systems. City officials died while gathering municipal records and



computers they would need later to coordinate the relief effort. Teachers died because they were the last to abandon their school buildings once their students had fled to higher ground.

Similarly, the locations of numerous hospitals and homes for the elderly placed them directly in harm's way. Staff simply lacked the resources needed to quickly relocate their patients. At several hospitals, staff carried patients up to roof tops, saving them from drowning only to see them expire from the lack of medicine and exposure to cold. Homes for elderly people were particularly hard hit as indicated by the fact that almost 66% of the confirmed dead were age 60 years or older. Many residents of these homes were invalids unable to walk, much less to run. Staff struggled to put them in available vehicles but with only thirty minutes warning, saving everyone proved impossible.

### *Evacuation Shelters*

Victims able to flee to sturdily built shelters found virtually no relief from the disaster. There was no electricity and within a couple of hours escape from the tsunami, the survivors sat in dark rooms without heat. There was no water for preparing food or for personal hygiene. Telephones and mobile phones did not work. Nor were the shelters stocked with blankets, medicine or food. The shelters were dark, frigid spaces rattled repeatedly by the numerous aftershocks.

Granted, the tsunami was enormous in power and height, but the magnitude of its devastation was magnified by the location of government buildings in areas vulnerable to tsunami. Had city offices, fire and police stations, and schools been built on higher land further inland, many more emergency workers would have survived and essential records preserved. Japan's central and prefecture governments now recognize this fact and are striving to convince local communities to relocate to higher ground or at least to rebuild selected facilities on sites less vulnerable to tsunami. Already some local leaders, responding to their constituents' preferences, are calling for a relaxation of laws and regulations regarding the location of select buildings and residential neighborhoods. The debate is certain to intensify during the forthcoming months.

### **The Prefectural Governments Respond**

Possibly the worse consequence of the disaster was that no one appeared to assist until the day after, much longer in many other communities. What little aid finally arrived, moreover, was feeble and ineffective in the face of the devastated area's needs.

Per evacuation plans, officials in Iwate, Miyagi and Fukushima prefectures awaited reports from municipalities. Nothing was heard from many because either local officials were dead, injured or lacked the means to communicate. Meanwhile, the central government waited to receive damage reports from the prefectures. Actually the most reliable and informative reports were provided by journalists, both Japanese and foreign, who risked their personal safety and ignored their families' concerns to rush into the devastated areas to report on conditions.

Within 24 hours of the disaster's occurrence, prefecture and central government officials realized the enormity of the victims needs and began to plan accordingly. But they quickly realized that they lacked the plans and resources to deal with the situation. While officials in prefectural capitals and Tokyo scrambled to initiate a relief effort, the victims were forced to take matters

into their own hands. They lined up for hours to get drinking water and to buy small amounts of food still available in some grocery stores. Since there was no electricity to pump gasoline and because many had lost their cars in the tsunami, they walked into devastated neighborhoods looking for blankets, candles, warm clothing, even paper diapers for babies and medicine.

Amazingly, prefecture governments had little to offer victims. In Sendai, capital of the worst affected prefecture, officials were preoccupied with problems within their own community. Iwate prefecture's officials were similarly burdened. In Fukushima, concerns about radioactive fallout prevented prefectural officials from rushing into tsunami damaged areas. In short, prefecture governments were ill prepared to do anything except send damage reports to Tokyo and address the immediate needs of the citizens in their capitals.

In Japan, prefecture governors cannot mobilize a "national guard" as is the case in the United States. Prefectures do not have fleets of helicopters and land vehicles for use in rescue and aid distribution. There is no pre-positioning or stock piling of food and medicine. They are virtually helpless to assist.

### **Tokyo Responds**

When the prefectures called on the central government for emergency assistance, Prime Minister Kan immediately realized how poorly prepared and equipped the Japanese government was to respond with concrete assistance. Without hesitation and in spite of reluctance by some in political and bureaucratic circles, Kan took unprecedented action. For the first time in Japan's history, the Japanese government sent out a plea for assistance from the international community, even to the US military stationed in Japan. The most urgent need was for helicopters. Roads and bridges had been washed away. Vehicles destroyed. Power lines were down everywhere. Medicine, fuel for heating and cooking, food and clothing were all needed in large quantities. But first stranded people on land and in the ocean needed to be located and rescued.

Unfortunately for some in need of rescue, the US Navy's 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet, its many vessel, helicopters and medical staff were in Southeast Asia. They immediately set sail for Japan but it would take at least three days to reach the coast off northeast Japan. Helicopters from the US Air Force base at Misawa, Japan, just north of the affected area, promptly joined helicopters from Japan's Self Defense Forces to search for survivors in the ocean and in isolated villages. En route, the fleet inadvertently sailed by Fukushima and soon discovered radiation falling from the sky onto the ships which then had to be literally scrubbed clean. Fortunately for the survivors, US military forces had pre-positioned some food and medical supplies on Okinawa and at other US military bases. Once the runway at Sendai Airport had been cleared of debris from the tsunami, US and Australian military transports began delivering food and medical supplies to the area.

The international community's response was immediate. Teams specialized in search and rescue after earthquakes scrambled to reach Japan as quickly as possible. They brought with them tons of high technology equipment and dogs to assist in the search for trapped victims. But no sooner did they arrive than they realized that the same problems that plagued the Japanese government also affected their well intended effort. Coordination with the communities needing

assistance was severely hampered by the absence of community leaders and emergency personnel because they had died or were injured. The widespread destruction of communication and logistics infrastructure also impeded their effort.

Prime Minister Kan ordered half of Japan's Self Defense Forces – 100,000 ground troops plus elements of the Coast Guard and Air Self Defense Forces to the stricken area. Ground Self Defense Forces (Japan's equivalent of an army) arrived as quickly as possible. Shockingly, most arrived equipped with nothing more than the clothing they wore, a flimsy paper face mask, gloves, a plastic helmet and a long walking stick. They immediately fanned out into destroyed communities to search for victims but soon this mission became one of finding and recovering bodies. Their vehicles, fuel, food and tents arrived days after them. They too had little to offer the survivors in the shelters – no field hospitals with medicine and medical care, no extra food or fuel for heating, not even tents for shelter. All they could supply was drinking water to long lines of thirsty victims who had managed to find containers to hold water.

### **Japan's NPOs Respond**

Japan's prompt and positive response to humanitarian crises around the world is well known. Much of this response consists of giving large sums of money to United Nations relief efforts and affected governments. People to people assistance is also government managed. In Japan there are no "non-governmental organizations" (NGO), only non-profit organizations known as NPOs. These privately organized groups all rely on the Japanese government for considerable financial support. Tax laws do not provide any incentives for private donations to NPOs, even those engaged in humanitarian assistance. If an NPO wishes to operate outside Japan, it must obtain the government's approval. Activities abroad are also funded almost entirely by the government. Within Japan, the largest NPO is the Japanese Red Cross. Actually it is more an extension of the Japanese government than an independent entity. It does collect donations from private individuals and commercial firms. But it does not use these funds to acquire the resources needed to respond concretely to a humanitarian crisis.

In short, Japan's NPO community is ill prepared to supplement government relief efforts. All it can do is wait for the government to assign it tasks. Almost a month passed before the central government turned to the NPO community for volunteers to service victims' needs at evacuation shelters. NPOs could collect the names of volunteers and then try to match them with government approved projects in the disaster area. NPOs have begun providing very valuable assistance, but they are ill organized, prepared and funded to react quickly to a natural disaster within Japan.

### **American NGO Assistance – the Long Term Need**

Frustration with the realities outlined above is most understandable, but American NGOs can do much more than vent frustration. They would do well to consider organizing an international conference to scrutinize how the international community, working with their Japanese counterparts, can better prepare Japan to deal with its next inevitable natural disaster. The endeavor could not and should not attempt to alter the political balance between the central and local governments. Rather, the conference could build on one of preferences in Japanese culture.

The avoidance of confrontation and controversy is highly prized, but at the same time the need for change is recognized. Maintaining respect for this preference while pursuing change is often achieved by turning to the *gaijin* our outsider to introduce into discussions options that allow the Japanese to make the final choice, achieve change but still avoid confrontation. An international conference of NGOs and Japanese NPOs could be the setting for helping the Japanese government and local communities make vital improvements to Japan's capacity to better prepared for a more prompt, effective and concrete response to the next, inevitable natural disaster, be it a typhoon, volcanic eruption, earthquake and/or tsunami.

### **Note on Sources:**

Much of the information in this essay was acquired during six years of teaching in Akita and Shizuoka prefectures, and two years as deputy director of the US Embassy's (Tokyo) Mutual Defense Assistance Office. Extensive travel from Hokkaido to Okinawa, numerous recent discussions with prefecture and local officials in Akita, Iwate and Miyagi Prefectures, faculty, students and staff at Akita International University, journalists and foreign government officials living in Sendai, plus a visit to and discussions with numerous officials at Rokkasho-mura, site of Japan's nuclear fuel reprocessing plant, provided invaluable insights. Japanese and international news coverage has been invaluable. After a faltering start, Japan's national network, NHK, has become increasingly comprehensive, candid and inclusive in its reporting. Also helpful have been information obtained from web sites, a few of which are listed below:

#### Japan

- Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies (AJISS), [www.jiia.or.jp](http://www.jiia.or.jp)
- [www.Gakuranman.com/great-tohoku-earthquake](http://www.Gakuranman.com/great-tohoku-earthquake) (Blog maintained by "Michael" in Japan, very comprehensive coverage in English.)
- Japan Metrological Agency. [www.jma.go.jp](http://www.jma.go.jp)
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