



FUKUSHIMA AND THE LESSONS OF THE PAST AS LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

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The disastrous calamity that bit Japan on March 11 with an initial earthquake of an unprecedented scale, then, the tsunami, estimated to have measured 23 meters or more. The impact of the disaster is such that it is bound to have broad social and political repercussions. For the time being, however, the Japanese rest their case. Now is not the time to focus on officials and others who are responsible for negligence. The lesson that Japan as a nation and a people will draw will be quite simple. 2011 will become a new 1868 or 1945, the two grand turning points in Japan's modern history.

Earthquakes and tsunamis are natural disasters over which no human being has control. But all Japanese have prepared from early childhood to handle earthquakes, and laws, regulations and legislation have been issued that will to the best of their ability help the Japanese cope with disasters. The Great Kanto Earthquake killing more than 100,000 in 1923 is in fresh national memory, and many have personal memories of the horrors of WWII when many Japanese cities were laid into ruins and ashes; Tokyo was one of them. On a smaller scale and in the more recent past is the Kobe earthquake in 1995 that killed more than 6,000.

A friend in Tokyo writes: "We are sure that all Japan will overcome ongoing unprecedented difficulties. So we are relatively reluctant to criticize our government and Tokyo Denryoku now." This stance makes sense. But a time will come for judgment. Who is responsible for upping the ante, causing unnecessary damage and calamity? Songs over heroes, now unsung, will be heard. Villains will be identified and castigated.

Lessons of the Past

The earthquake in Kobe in 1995 gave important insights that have lessened the damage of the Godzilla of all disasters that has now hit Japan. Then, the Japanese learnt the damage that can be caused by sloppy central authorities and the need to follow strict rules and regulations when buildings, roads and other facilities are constructed. When rules and regulations had been followed by constructing companies, buildings did not collapse and toll roads on their pillars did not tip over.

I remember vividly how upset the public was some years ago when it turned out that school buildings in the Tokyo

metropolitan area were faulty after the construction company had cheated in its hunting for profits. To rebuild these buildings was going to be very costly, but the unanimous decision taken at the time was: so be it!

The strict application of rules and regulations by Japanese authorities over the years saved countless lives in the disaster that we witness now. Lessons from natural disasters have been learnt, and adjustments have been made. As a result, damage in the Tokyo area caused by the earthquake has been limited.

Another lesson from 1995 was the need for national resilience and perseverance. At that time, NGOs, not the central government, saved the situation. So, this time, the government under Prime Minister Kan acted decisively. In a situation of great calamity, Kan wanted to reassure the Japanese that this time, they had a government that acted.

But good will is not enough. During a conference in 1998 in Shrigley Hall, UK, one of the Japanese participants told me during a break that he had lived in Kobe when the earthquake struck. More than 6,000 were killed; immense suffering. On the other side of the Osaka Bay, he said, he saw the bustling life in Osaka with the neon lights glittering; there, life went on as normal. Osaka people, he said, didn't bother a bit about neighboring Kobe and earthquake victims. He was very bitter.

I fear that the situation might be similar now. Several days after the disaster struck, Radio Sweden's Staffan Sonning reported about roads to the disaster areas that were passable so that the area could be easily reached; but arriving there, there were no help, no food, no water, no rescuers, just countless victims. People were left on their own to care for themselves.



Reports from the Scene of the Disaster

But the situation may be that bad after all. In a mail from Sachiko Ishikawa, a JICA official who has been instrumental for Japan's efforts to implement Japan's policy for human security in Southeast Asia, I found some reassuring information. She writes:

“For the first week after the earthquake and tsunamis, we did see little public assistance to the tsunami-affected areas mainly due to damages of roads and other means of transportation and also because of lack of sufficient information on how many people have been sheltered where. Japanese TV programs showed, during the first week, how many people were suffering and how they helped each other with scarce food and fuels without public assistance from the government. Some shelters organized self-help committees and demarcated their roles to play to run the life of shelters. Elsewhere in Japan, people were working almost fanatically to secure money and necessary commodities for the affected population before the route of assistance was established. The unity of Japanese people was visible in many ways.

From the second week, we started to learn that public assistance had been mobilized in various forms. The SDF was deployed to search survivals and also to collect corpses. The SDF also delivered necessary items to shelters. Assistance from foreign countries was also visible on the second week. NGOs and volunteers were active but not very much in an organized manner. Temporary residences for those who lost their own houses are being under construction in very much hastened manner.

I have found it very difficult to grasp a whole picture of the disasters. There are two main reasons: First, the tsunami-affected areas are too broad including many cities and areas; there are more than 2,000 temporary shelters in the disaster area. Although media try to cover comprehensively what happens in the area, it is impossible to do so. At the end of the day, we get pieces of information and cannot understand what has happened in the tsunami-affected area as a whole. Second, the central government is not functioning efficiently in the sense

of assistance to the tsunami-affected area in a collective manner. It seems that the central government is preoccupied by the emergency of radioactive reactors in Fukushima. While the central government cannot play a role as a commander, various local governments have become very active and have extended whatever assistance they can.

The central government needs to make ‘a reconstruction plan’ for the tsunami-affected areas as soon as possible while other agencies, local governments together with volunteers and NGOs are coping with the current humanitarian aids.”

The Future of Japan

It is not by sheer chance that the natural phenomenon called tsunami has a Japanese name. In Japan, disasters like earthquakes, tsunamis and volcanic eruptions are often of a vast scale and death toll has many times been terrifying. But Japan, as a country and nation, has overcome these kinds of hardships—many times. What differs this time is that the nuclear accident is added to the calamities that ransack Japan. Earthquakes and tsunamis are known from Japan's historical records and the experiences over many centuries have made the Japanese nation capable of handling even the most destructive natural disasters known to mankind. But nuclear accidents are new Swords of Damocles hanging over Japan that have to be handled. If not, Japan's future will be bleak, indeed.

I think that the lesson that Japan as a nation and a people will draw will be quite simple. 2011 will become a new 1868 or 1945, the two grand turning points in Japan's modern history.

But, first things first, the Fukushima disaster has to be handled.

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