

“It was occurring in my nation and I was the spectator”: reflections three years on about the Japan earthquake and tsunami

blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2014/03/10/it-was-occurring-in-my-nation-and-i-was-the-spectator-reflections-three-years-on-about-the-japan-earthquake-and-tsunami/

2014-3-10

This article Polis intern Asuka Kageura

Last Sunday at a small church in London a service was held to commemorate “3/11”, the Great East Japan earthquake. The spring sun was shining above the attendants who were remembering the scenes of that day, praying for victims and survivors, and singing the charity song “Hana wa saku” (the flower blooms) with prayers for local people in the damaged North East area.



Three years may allow us to accomplish something, but it also allows shocking memories of 3.11 to fade away. The international media’s focus is now mainly on the report of Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant incident and the demonstrations that followed. The ‘invisible fear’ of radiation has been exaggerated through some media, and some news posts and blogs talking about the Fukushima incident give an inaccurate picture of the explosion at the LPG station in Chiba.

On the other hand, there were also positive, less-covered news in the aftermath. According to the research done by International Development Center of Japan, material, financial, and labour support came from 174 countries in the first year of the disaster: 119 are the recipients of Japanese ODA, 35 are lesser developed countries.

Heart-warming stories

A report from Ministry of Foreign Affairs paid tribute to the international rescue teams including South Africa, India, Turkey and Israel that did outstanding job in the devastated area. There are many other heart-warming stories of people from the Global South giving aids and foods to Japanese locals.

Some may say Japan, the third largest economy in the world, should not receive help from the so-called 'Third World'. I believe comparison is nonsense when it comes to a natural disaster where people willing to express their empathy in this way.

I still remember the moment when the earthquake occurred, though my prefecture, Toyama on Japan's north coast, was not damaged. TV broadcasts of the Tsunami absorbing people, houses, cars, ships, trees and anything to the ocean seemed more like a movie than reality.

Spectator of Suffering

It was occurring in my nation and I was the spectator. I kept checking news to catch up with the situation, strangely there was a feeling of distance between 'us' and 'them.' Since that day, our local newspaper covered stories of NGO and volunteers fundraising and visiting the devastated area; evacuees from Fukushima coming to Toyama and starting new lives; and local groups organizing short trip for children in Fukushima who cannot go outside freely because of the radiation.

One short visit to one of the damaged areas, Ishinomaki in the Miyagi prefecture last March perturbed my heart. The media coverage of the aftermath of 3.11 usually picks up particular places and not every area is shed a light on. The condition of Ishinomaki was much worse than I had expected.



The local train toward Ishinomaki was and is still partly under construction for recovery and the alternative buses leads people to the destination. Former residential towns were still a wide zone of collapsed houses, bricks and wood. School buildings were severely damaged and will never be used again. One school had banners saying "Appreciation" and "From now, from here."

I was walking among piles of debris, with strong smell of sea water and rotten fish. I realized that I was psychologically rejecting this uncanny atmosphere. A taxi driver, on the way back said "Now the damaged areas are restricted from living

and the city is constructing new residential town up on the hill, it's still uncertain when we can move in."

Displaced Lives

In three years, charity aid shifted from emergency need to mental support. Emergency radio stations built after the 3.11 are closing down and having financial problem to continue their activity for the community. 3.11 related tourism and business supports local economy from recovery. Lines of "trip to the community temporary stores", "taxi drive around the damaged area with storytelling," and "weekend volunteer in the devastated area" decorates tour banners. Even the evacuee area in Fukushima has loosened restrictions and the decontamination is proceeding little by little. Locals make efforts to rebuild displaced lives.

But can we trust what our leaders say about reconstruction? Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said at the IOC general assembly that "the nuclear contaminated water issue is under control" to make sure that Japan was seen as safe enough for the 2020 Olympic games. His words following the creation of the new "State Secret Law" and restrictions on freelance and foreign Journalist to access to information regarding Fukushima nuclear facility. It all resulted in the latest "Worldwide Press Freedom Index of 2014." ranking Japan at 59th, where it used to be in the top twenties.

Now the biggest concern within the survivors is that Tokyo may reduce the amount of support by prioritizing the construction process for the upcoming Olympic. Opinions are divided among citizens. One side argues that holding Olympic game will reinforce the recovery, while the other says it will shift government's focus to Tokyo and pay less attention to people in and from the devastated areas.

All I can do is to write this blog and think of the people there and remember the strong smell of sea water surrounding Ishinomaki residential area. It warns me "never forget."

This article by Polis intern and LSE student Asuka Kageura

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