Photos: Hidekazu Nakata

(Top)Yoshihama elementary school: the clock shows 2:46. (Center on p. 2 & 2nd from top on p. 3) Shizugawa, a small port town in Minamisanriku, was destroyed. (Bottom on pp. 2-3 & top on p. 3) Ishinomaki, 1.1mil. of 1.7mil. people were affected. (2nd from bottom on p. 3) View of the small town Aikawa from a collapsed road.

Special Report

• Tohoku Earthquake & Tunami •

In the eye of the cyclone

By Régis ARNAUD

One more, I thought, on March 11, at 2:46 pm. One more earthquake, like thousands of others I'd experienced since I arrived in Japan on February 4, 1995. At that time, the country had just suffered the Kobe earthquake. "Don't go to Japan!" my mum warned me. I thought it would never be worse than Kobe. I thought my mum was exaggerating.

I was wrong. At 2:46 on March 11, the earth was shaking so strongly that I had to take cover under my desk at the French Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Actually, the earth was not just shaking. The earth was furious. The earth was yelling. It had become the back of a fantastic, trembling monster, on which we poor Lilliputians were riding without choice. "So what did you think at that time?," my friend in France asked, wanting to feel the emotional rollercoaster that he could only imagine I had gone through. To tell the truth, I did not think at all. I was just an atom in the universe. I now realize that to think is a luxury, to breathe is a luxury.

When the earthquake finally stopped, I went outside with my colleagues. While Japanese people went back to their desks after a few seconds as if nothing had happened, French people stayed for a while in the street, in disarray. We started to realize at that time that nothing would ever be the same as before; that what we had taken for granted was not, that actually nothing was to be taken for granted; that Japan's problems of a stagnant GDP, political paralysis, ageing, and so on were actually ridiculous and benign; *that like the axis of the Earth after the quake, the axis of our lives had changed.*

From then on, I would feel an earthquake every 20 minutes for days. Somebody once explained to me that the cats of Tokyo are very nervous because they feel earthquakes much sooner than humans. On March 11, we, the people living in Japan, became like those cats, walking on a soil that was constantly moving. From Kanto to Tohoku, northern Japan became a boat of 50 million passengers in the middle of a cyclone.

Paul Theroux says that Tokyo is "a machine." On March 11, this machine stopped functioning. No more mobile phones. No more trains. The only thing that still worked was the internet, and, therefore, Skype. Men and women took to the streets after all the trains stopped. Tokyo looked like the day of a strike in Paris for the first time in my Japanese life. Except that Tokyo people were still cool. They were waiting for the green light to go across the street. I heard a Japanese lady whispering behind me *"dame"*(no good), the way a French lady does when it rains.

Calm Amidst Crisis

When I heard that the epicenter was offshore from Sendai, I hired a car the next day and headed there with four colleagues. It usually takes 100 minutes to reach Sendai from Tokyo by *shinkansen*. This time it took us 26 hours. We stopped in a supermarket after a few hours drive. Already, there were no more mineral water bottles. Soon there would be no more bread, batteries or gasoline in this part of Japan. But there was no sign of disaster until we reached Fukushima. "Fukushima:" by now everybody in the world knows this name, and is afraid to hear it as it is associated with a nuclear power plant that is threatening the whole country. Yet life seemed very calm even in Fukushima, as stable as the eye of a cyclone. Young mothers were chatting in the streets. Gas station employees were pouring gasoline into my car. Soon there would be no more gasoline. The only strange thing was that everything was trembling. The car was trembling. The employee pouring gasoline was trembling while smiling. The voice of the radio announcer on NHK was trembling, sometimes on the verge of bursting into tears. I was trembling.

We reached Natori before reaching Sendai. Natori is where the huge wave of mud hit, which everybody in the world has now seen. When I arrived, Natori was just a name. Its rice paddies were filled with cars, planes, boats piling up on top of each other. Yuriage, a small part of Natori which faces the sea, had been devastated. Only the tombs of the local cemetery still stand, ironically, in the middle of this neighborhood. They looked like sentinels, like the victorious soldiers of a war waged by death and chaos over life. They owned the place.

In her destroyed house, Yuka Watanabe, housewife, was happy to find an intact TV screen. "I was so lucky," she said, "I am still alive." An old woman who walked with eyes wide open, like a specter in the night, was finding her way through the rubble, yelling the name of someone she loved, who never replied. People looking for loved ones had gathered at the Natori ward office, looking for names on lists of people who had registered at the shelters around the region. Messages were on the board at the entrance. They seemed to cross each other without ever replying to each other: "I am worried! Call Me. Tomoko." "I am alive! Toshi." Already I was struck by the dignity and calm of the population. As people were waiting in front of free phone lines to call their relatives, they offered me, a rich, unaffected foreign journalist who had suffered nothing, the chance to make phone calls if I wanted to. These marks of fraternity are unbelievable.

Then I reached Sendai. I was surprised by how the city center was intact. Traffic lights were working. Water was abundant.

False Alarm

But the earth was still shaking. The sea was still threatening. I passed the city center and drove towards Shiogama, on the coast. Suddenly I heard on the radio of the car: "Tsunami alert! If you are near the sea in the Sendai region, get out of your car now and climb as high as possible!" So I abandoned the car. My fellow journalists and I climbed an upper highway and met other Japanese people and some SDF soldiers who where gathering people who had not heard the news. "Climb! Climb!," yelled a soldier. "Here it's OK," said another one. We are eight meters above the ground!" "I heard the wave is 13 meters!," a Japanese man said. The soldier stared at him, dumbfounded. "The wave will hit in 15 minutes!"

I started becoming nervous. I didn't know what to do. My mobile phone rang: it was my mother, who was calling me from France. She had seen on French TV that the tsunami was about to hit Sendai, and was wondering where I was. I could not take that call, and tell her that I was right in the middle of this coming tsunami. She was already freaked out that I was still in Japan. Like all my foreign friends, my family at home was panicking. French, English, American, German expatriates had started packing their luggage to go back to Europe, Hong Kong, Singapore....

When I left a few days later for France, all the French passengers in the plane confessed that they loved Japan, and that they were only coming back to reassure their mothers. My parents felt I was in constant danger of dying. My grandmother and my father started having health problems and panic attacks because of my stay in Sendai. "Nine minutes!," a soldier yelled. In the buildings around us families started gathering on balconies, waiting for the wave. "False alarm! No wave!," a soldier finally said. We went back to the car, feeling a little bit better, and proceeded towards the sea.

Japanese Solidarity and Fraternity

Unlike French people, Japanese people show total solidarity. In the town of Tagajo, in front of the sea, hundreds of homeless people had taken shelter in a school gymnasium, "where the roof is big so it will not fall on us," a lady explained to me. They shared in strict equality the little food they still had. "My dog can eat for 10 days, but me, I don't know what I will eat tonight," said a young girl hugging Angie, her puppy. Four days after the tsunami these poor people had still not seen any police, ambulances, firemen, SDFs or journalists. "We have no electricity, no water, no phone, and almost no more rice," said Emiko Ito, a fisherwoman. There was no heating and the temperature was around zero at night. A teacher called Noriko Sato had become the head of this community. "I could persuade people to share

everything, but it has been hard. Anyway we have no choice. The government will not help us. We must help ourselves!," she said.

During these days I heard exactly the same complaints about Japan as I heard during any national crisis (e.g., Snow Brand milk, mad cow disease): the government is too weak, regulations are enforced by the industry, etc. As Noriko Sato talked with me, her son Daigo, eight years old, gave me a piece of chewing gum. There are times in life where there is nothing more amazing than a piece of chewing gum. My Japanese *sempai,* Kuni Matsuoka, was marvelling 60 years after the war about a piece of chewing gum an American GI had given him in the first hours after WWII. Daigo gave me hope in Japan. His pullover was full of mud, but I could distinguish under the mud the name of an American university. Daigo is only eight, but his English ability is already better than Naoto Kan's, I thought. "How did you feel during the earthquake, Daigo?," I asked. "Nothing," he said.

I also met Ryoichi Hashiguchi near Tagajo. He is the doctor in charge at Sengen Hospital. With a small team of nurses he was taking care of 113 patients. The tsunami flooded the first floor of the hospital, and he had to carry the patients on his back to the higher floors to save them. He had also fished up the pills that had been flooded out by the tsunami, cleaned them, broken them up to get out the contents, and given them as medicine to his patients. At night, only candles on the floor gave some light to the hospital. One kilometer away a refinery complex had been burning for three days. Ryoichi Hashiguchi did not sleep any more. His nurses called him "Doctor Samurai."

Then I drove to Arahama, where the tsunami's devastation covers more than 10 kilometers. In a field, Japanese soldiers carried dead bodies in blue bags. They had already recovered 300 bodies when I arrived, and evacuated them to cremate them. In this desolate landscape I met Takahashi Takanori. This young man had come to pick up some food he had left in his car, which had been half-destroyed by the tsunami. "The tsunami came towards me from a distance of 100 meters," he said, his eyes still filled with panic. He had managed to climb on to the highway when the tsunami came. His parents climbed an electricity pole, held on to it, and were also saved. But his old grandmother had been swept away. "Too bad," he said. He had managed to save a woman and her child, but most women and children had been taken away by the wave. "They could not climb. They were not tall enough to reach the highway," he said. "The only thing I have left is hope." He had a *ramen* restaurant. Every day he prepared 500 bowls of *ramen* for free, for people in need.

My girlfriend Masako showed me what Japanese fraternity is, because she put it above the interest of our relationship at that time. Six days after the tsunami, the Fukushima power plant problems were giving no sign of respite. Fire after fire was reported in the reactors and the surrounding area. There were still many earthquakes. And it rained, which had the effect of fixing radiation in the soil.

Just Doing Our Job

The French ambassador had asked French people to leave Tokyo if they did not need to stay there. Then the French Foreign Ministry advised French people to leave no matter what. Chaos reigned. At that time I was in Ichinoseki, north of Sendai. I was exhausted. The futon in my room was shaking like a lifeboat, and I could not fall asleep. As I was fighting my nerves, I admired Richard Lloyd Parry from *The Times* of London. Richard was totally calm. He never flinched. Not only my parents, but also friends from the nuclear industry and from the electricity industry were sending me lots of emails urging me to leave. "And what does your barber advise you to do?," Richard replied when I was wondering out loud if it was not time to go back to Tokyo, like all foreign journalists. "Look, he said. This is our job. Period."

I asked Masako to evacuate Tokyo with our two daughters and go to France for a while. It was easy, it was logical. "Go back with our daughters. But I have to stay. My colleagues are wondering how to help. I cannot leave them. Never. I cannot." Silence. "I understand, Masako." She would not leave the sinking ship. She would stay until the end of the journey, even if this journey meant disease or death. Because nothing was worse for her than leaving Japan now, at this terrible hour. Actually, she added, "I am disappointed that you even consider leaving Tohoku. You are a journalist. Do your job!"

Evil Irony

Then I reached Minami Sanriku, a city of 17,000 souls that now exists only on GPS maps, as it was eaten up by a wave higher than 17 meters. The destruction was so huge that it had become baroque. The sea had left a car on the building of the police dormitory. On one of the walls of the port, there was a beautiful painting by children that said, "Let's protect the blue sea, that is so beautiful!!" I felt the irony of evil. This region was living off the sea, and the sea had destroyed it. Next I went to Ishinomaki, where I had been in 1996, to visit the family of Yuko, my girlfriend at the time. I had eaten urchins as big as my fist, and pieces of tuna that melted like butter in my mouth. Now all this is just a memory. But Yuko, her two daughters and her husband are alive. I stayed two more days in Tohoku, then I told Richard I wanted to come back to Tokyo, pick up my two daughters and take a rest with them in France. We came back to Tokyo. JS

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