

How Do Japanese People React during a Time of National Crisis?

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Shizugawa, two months after the earthquake

On March 11, 2011 at 2:46 pm, residents of the northeast coast of Japan found out the answer to the question above in the most horrible way. After being hit by the most powerful earthquake in Japanese history followed by a tsunami that rolled in over roads, schools, houses, offices and hospitals, leaving destruction and death in its wake, those who were lucky enough to still be alive faced cold winds, lack of food, poor sanitary facilities, and of course the realization that from that moment their total assets had been reduced to whatever happened to be in their pockets. The rest of Japan watched in horror as television screens showed the rising death toll numbers superimposed over the replaying images of the destruction caused by the water. Then, there was a new threat as the nuclear reactors in the Fukushima Dai-ichi plant started spewing radioactive steam into the air. After several hydrogen gas explosions blew out the walls and roofs, it didn't take long until panic on a global scale was triggered. Overseas branch offices closed their doors, embassies relocated, and a large number of foreign residents fled the country on the recommendation of their respective governments. But what did the Japanese do?

Earthquake Preparedness

I once had the opportunity to visit the factory of one of Japan's major home builders. On this tour, one of the main selling points was earthquake resistance, which was demonstrated by dropping an entire house frame from a height of ten meters straight onto the ground. Naturally, there was no damage to the structure. If a building can take such a fall, it can take anything, was the point they wanted to get across.

The people of Japan have lived with the constant threat of earthquakes and tsunamis (as we all know, a Japanese word) since the beginning of time, and they have learned to adapt to it. All Japanese are told to, and most of them do, keep a bag of emergency supplies ready by the front door in case it is necessary to evacuate. In kindergarten they practice taking cover under sturdy tables as soon as tremors can be felt. Offices, schools and hospitals regularly hold evacuation drills. A highly advanced earthquake detection system can in some cases give a few seconds warning, enough time to move to a safer position. Every bookshelf or TV they buy comes with an attachment to secure it safely to the wall. Since a quake happens somewhere in Japan every ten minutes, they are constantly reminded of the very real danger involved in living on the border of three tectonic plates. In short, earthquake prevention is taken very seriously in Japan and the threat exists in everyone's mind, every minute, every day. In the light of this, it is fairly safe to say that no other country in the world was better prepared to handle an earthquake like the one on March 11 than Japan, in spite of the tremendous death toll.

Preparation and planning is the key to surviving any emergency situation and without it the death toll in Japan would have been much, much greater. High-rises swayed, but they did not collapse, a testament to the advanced building technologies of Japan. Residents near the coastline were given a full 27 minutes to escape to higher ground after the tsunami alert had been issued - not enough for everybody, especially the sick and the elderly, but enough to save tens of thousands of lives.

Maintaining Order

We have all seen the effects that a natural disaster can have on society. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, authorities in New Orleans had to work hard to maintain order, with National Guard troops being ordered to shoot looters on sight. On TV we could see people breaking into liquor stores and electronic retailers, loading up what they could on rafts and boats. There were even reports of shots fired at rescue helicopters. In Haiti we saw similar scenes - street violence as people grabbed what they could get their hands on - every man for himself.

In Japan order was maintained, even without the intervention by authorities, much to the surprise of those foreigners who had witnessed the aftermath of disasters in other parts of the world. For the ones that have spent a longer time in this country, however, anything else would have been unthinkable. The group mentality in Japan seems to be so strong that even if housing, infrastructure and law enforcement break down completely, people still feel part of a community whose needs come before those of the individual. Here, the very fabric of society is held together by the strong bonds between people, as opposed to the rule of law and fear of punishment. Thus, there was very little looting, the strong helped the weak, and the rich gave to the poor. Store owners distributed their merchandise for free to victims. Blogs and social media sites were used to exchange stories of how shoppers paid for their items by putting the right amount of money on the counter next to the non-operating cash registers. In the confusion they could just as easily have slipped out of the dark store unnoticed.

Trust in the Government

There is a general distrust in the Japanese government and Japanese media by many foreigners, proven by the way many decided to leave the country at the encouragement of their own embassies, but contrary to Japanese recommendations. A German



Photos: Yoshiaki Sasaki

"Minato Cafe" in an evacuation center in Minato Junior High School, Ishinomaki, is supported by many young volunteers.

designer living in Tokyo says that she feels the Japanese are accepting things too easily, arguing that they should put more pressure on the government and TEPCO for answers. For example, even now (at the time of writing, exactly two months after the tsunami struck) no one knows when farmers around the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear facility will be able to return to their land. In a few months? In a year? Never? In spite of this uncertainty, there are very few public displays of anger or demonstrations. Perhaps it is this belief that the government will ultimately do what is best for the people and not withhold any information that has helped to maintain order, even during the most chaotic of circumstances.

Support for Victims

Immediately after the tsunami it was hardly surprising that Red Cross Japan and other NGOs were quick to start collecting money for relief efforts, and also not surprising that the Japanese were happy to empty their wallets. What surprised many foreigners, though, is that the Japanese went even further than that, encouraging the population to support the farmers in Fukushima by buying their produce. For those of us who lived in Europe after the Chernobyl disaster and who remember the warnings not to eat certain foods, warnings that are still in effect today, this seemed utterly amazing. No matter how much the government promoted it, people in Russia would never line up to purchase "Chernobyl" brand strawberries. Yet in Japan, that is precisely what people did- even the Emperor himself.

Trained, Cool, Calm

The view of most foreigners who live in Japan is that the Japanese reacted to the crisis following the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami in a most commendable way, and they recognize that if a similar event had happened in their own country, the response would have been far worse. The Japanese were prepared, they knew what they had to do, and they stuck to the plan, calmly and efficiently. No one lost control. An American actress living in Tokyo described the Japanese reaction as "trained, cool, calm," which may appear crazy considering the circumstances. She pointed out, though, that if you talk to Japanese people individually you find out that they share the

same fears as everybody else, it's just that they don't show them to outsiders. The lights in their homes staying on all night may be the only indicator of their worries. Those who lost their loved ones kept their grief to themselves, maintaining their posture even though their whole world, quite literally, had collapsed.

Perhaps the greatest frustration for foreigners was precisely this: watching the Japanese go about their daily routines seemingly as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening, even as Fukushima Dai-ichi plant blew up on live TV. One foreign language teacher told me how he desperately wanted to get out of Tokyo out of fear of radiation exposure, but how his Japanese employer was visibly upset, urging him to return to his work the following morning. For him, it was the Japanese that were acting irrationally by not understanding the potential danger. For the Japanese it was business as usual, or at least it appeared to be.

The Future

Repairing the damage from the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami is a task that will stretch far into the future. Long after the rubble has been cleared and the visible traces have been erased, the emotional scars will remain in the minds of those who lost something, someone, or everything. But we foreigners who live in Japan know that if there is one people on this earth that will be able to rise up out of the ashes, rebuild their country and emerge even stronger than before, it is the Japanese. Perhaps the Egyptian ambassador to Japan, Dr. Walid Abdelnasser, who has visited the disaster area, put it best: "What struck me most in the aftermath of the devastating Great East Japan Earthquake was the steadfastness and resilience of the Japanese people. Their extraordinary determination to overcome this crisis and recover and rebuild what has been destroyed has served as an inspiration to all of us. I have no doubt that the Japanese people, with their fortitude and stoicism, will overcome the inordinate challenges they face during these difficult times." **JS**

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