

Interview with Riku Oyama, assistant director, Preparation Office of Establishing the Disaster Management Agency, Cabinet Secretariat

Reframing Disaster Risk Reduction in Japan: the New Disaster Management Agency's Commitment

By Japan SPOTLIGHT

In July 2026, the Diet passed the Act to Establish the Disaster Management Agency, marking the first step toward creating Japan's new command center for disaster risk reduction, response, recovery and reconstruction. We spoke with a young official helping to lead the agency's preparation office.
(Interviewed on July 21, 2026)

Introduction

JS: Will the Disaster Management Agency begin its operations in November?

Oyama: The legislation establishing the agency was just passed recently, and the government is working toward launching it within the year.

JS: Could you tell us a bit about yourself, particularly your experience in disaster management?

Oyama: I am currently seconded from the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (MLIT), where I have mainly been involved in river-related infrastructure development and management. Preparation Office of Establishing the Disaster Management Agency was launched in November 2024, and since then I have been fully engaged in establishing the new agency.

During my time at MLIT, I also worked at local field offices, where I dealt with responses to wind and flood disasters. Through those experiences, I came to understand firsthand how essential it is to strengthen disaster risk reduction across the country, especially given that disasters can occur anywhere in Japan at any time.

JS: Regarding the reasons behind the agency's establishment, we understand that there has been growing concern that Japan may face major disasters – such as a Nankai Trough earthquake or a Tokyo inland earthquake – while preparedness for those possible disasters remains insufficient. Could



Riku Oyama

you share your thoughts on this?

Oyama: Up to now, disaster response has been coordinated mainly by the Cabinet Office's disaster management team, working together with relevant ministries and local governments. I believe we have managed to get through past disasters under that framework. However, when we consider the potential impact of a Nankai Trough earthquake, the scale of damage expected is far beyond anything we have experienced before. This means we need to further strengthen our ability to respond when a major disaster occurs.

To prepare for such large-scale events, it is essential to reinforce a wide range of pre-disaster measures during normal times from hard infrastructure to soft non-structural initiatives. With this in mind, the government has decided to establish a new, independent Disaster Management Agency, creating a structure that enables all relevant ministries and agencies to work together as one. We are now moving forward with building that system.

The Role of the Disaster Management Agency

JS: Regarding the role the Disaster Management Agency is expected to play, we understand that it will not only work to prevent major disasters before they occur but also focus on reducing their impact. Notably, these efforts will be carried out through collaboration not only with other ministries and agencies, but also with local governments and organizations such as NPOs. How will these

collaborative relationships be built?

Oyama: The Disaster Management Agency is intended to bring together the strengths of industry, government, academia, and civil society, serving as the command center for driving thorough disaster risk reduction – combining structural and non-structural measures in normal times, both to prevent damage before it occurs, through such steps as the seismic retrofitting of buildings and infrastructure and urban development that factors in disaster risk, and to put arrangements in place ahead of time for a timely and effective response, including how damage is assessed and how support reaches affected areas once a disaster strikes – and for coordinating disaster response from the moment an event occurs through recovery and reconstruction. However, disaster management is not something the national government can handle entirely on its own, nor does the establishment of the agency mean it will take over everything.

In line with past practice, local governments will continue to be on the front lines when disasters occur. We do not intend to fundamentally change the important role they have traditionally played.

On the other hand, it is not realistic to expect disaster-affected local governments to handle every aspect of on-the-ground response, such as transporting supplies to affected areas or managing evacuation centers, entirely on their own, given the limitations in manpower.

In that context, one initiative the national government has been working on since last year is the introduction of “Hometown Disaster Management Officers”. These officers serve as dedicated points of contact for each of Japan’s 47 prefectures. This initiative will continue even after the Disaster Management Agency is established. The aim is to build visible, day-to-day working relationships between the national government and local governments, so that when something happens, we can also provide personnel support.

In terms of cooperation with companies and NPOs, one effort we launched last fiscal year is the new “Registered Disaster Support Organizations” system, which helps create direct, visible connections with NPOs and similar groups. As for agreements between local governments and private companies for disaster response, we believe it is necessary to further encourage the conclusion of such agreements. At the same time, a key challenge going forward is how to ensure these agreements are truly effective in practice.

With that in mind, we recently established an expert panel to examine how collaboration between local communities and private companies should function. We intend to discuss concrete directions in the coming months.

JS: Disasters come in many forms – not only the wind and flood damage or typhoons you have handled

before, but also earthquakes and even pandemics. Will the Disaster Management Agency cover a wide range of disasters? Or is the agency primarily focused on earthquakes?

Oyama: The main focus of the Disaster Management Agency will be natural disasters – specifically earthquakes, wind and flood damage, and volcanic events. The agency is expected to take the lead in coordinating the response for such disasters.

In the case of a pandemic, the Cabinet Agency for Infectious Disease Crisis Management, which is positioned within the Cabinet Secretariat, will serve as the command center for infectious-disease emergencies. Likewise, for nuclear disasters, the Cabinet Office’s Nuclear Disaster Management division will continue to function as the command authority. In this way, areas requiring specialized expertise will be handled through a division of roles among the relevant organizations.

JS: Disaster management inevitably requires a broad, cross-sectoral perspective – encompassing energy policy, industrial policy, and urban planning, among other areas. In that sense, it becomes a highly integrated undertaking, one that typically benefits from a think-tank-like function to support its work. Should we understand that the Disaster Management Agency will assume such a role?

Oyama: While it would be ideal for the Disaster Management Agency itself to have some think tank functions, the reality is that its staff will consist mainly of career government officials. For that reason, we intend to draw on the disaster-related research institutes within the relevant ministries and also work closely with universities across the country. By incorporating academic and expert perspectives in a flexible manner, the agency hopes to examine policy approaches that make full use of scientific knowledge.

At the same time, when it comes to specialized expertise on disaster-response know-how, the agency will need to accumulate its own knowledge base. With a view to applying lessons and insights from upcoming disasters to strengthen later measures, building this body of knowledge within the Disaster Management Agency will be an essential task going forward.

JS: There is an advisory committee preparing for the establishment of the agency. Will the experts on that committee take the lead in carrying out these specialized functions?

Oyama: We would certainly appreciate receiving opinions and advice from the experts on that committee regarding the various challenges

in disaster-management policy. At the same time, the Cabinet Office's current disaster-management division already consults with individual experts on specific issues, and we intend to continue valuing those networks as well. By drawing on this broader community of specialists, we hope to maintain a strong and diverse base of expertise.

JS: Human resources development will become increasingly important. As disaster-management efforts come to rely more on digital technologies, we will need experts in those areas, and as we saw during Covid-19, evidence-based policymaking will also be essential. If you have a policy or direction regarding the development of such human resources, could you share it with us?

Oyama: The Disaster Management Agency aims to build human capacity in disaster management by developing professionals with specialized expertise who can coordinate effectively among the various stakeholders involved. The Digital Agency is already developing digital-technology professionals on a broad scale, and if disaster-management perspectives could be incorporated into that effort, it would help build a pool of digital disaster-management specialists as well.

We also plan to establish a division within the Disaster Management Agency dedicated to promoting disaster-management DX. Through that division, we hope to work with the relevant ministries to build human capacity, for example, by providing training to local governments on how to use the Cabinet Office's New Integrated Disaster Information System, which serves as a centralized platform for disaster-related information. We hope to strengthen human resources development through this kind of inter-ministerial collaboration.

When it comes to evidence-based policymaking, conducting proper disaster-risk assessments at the regional level and determining how each locality can design its disaster-management measures on the basis of objective data will be a major pillar of what the Disaster Management Agency should tackle. As for human resources development in this area, we are considering holding regular learning sessions with local government officials. At the same time, we hope to create an environment that enables municipalities to carry out risk assessments smoothly, for example, by developing guidelines on disaster-risk assessment.

Incorporating Diverse Perspectives in Disaster Management

JS: While strengthening support by incorporating diverse perspectives including foreign nationals is

essential, public education also plays an important role. In particular, disaster-management education must reach children in elementary and junior-high schools as well. Do you have any policy direction or plans regarding education for the general public in this area?

Oyama: We recognize the increase in foreign visitors to Japan due to inbound tourism, and we intend to strengthen our efforts to provide information to foreign residents and visitors to enable them to take appropriate action in the event of a disaster. This will include building on initiatives we have already undertaken.

At the same time, a growing area of concern is the living conditions of disaster-affected people during evacuation. Living comfortably in shelters is a right that should be guaranteed equally to everyone, Japanese citizens and foreign residents alike. With that in mind, we would like to examine how evacuation shelters should be designed and managed so that foreign residents can also receive the same benefits.

JS: I understand that many foreign residents in Japan have pointed out that disaster information is still not adequately provided in multiple languages. Are there any measures or plans you are currently considering for addressing this issue?

Oyama: With the growing number of foreign nationals in Japan, it is essential to provide multilingual disaster information, covering the key languages spoken by foreign residents. As is the case for Japanese residents, the actions one can take at the moment a disaster occurs are limited. For foreign nationals staying in Japan for a certain period, it is important to understand the local risks, know where to obtain information, and know how to evacuate, and to look into these matters during normal times. Conducting such simulations in advance would help them take calm and appropriate action if and when a disaster occurs. So we believe we should try to provide multilingual information tools, including hazard maps, so they can be used to check what actions to take in advance.

JS: As you mentioned, the number of inbound visitors has increased significantly, so one approach would be to work with the Japan Tourism Agency to provide multilingual hazard maps and disaster-related information in advance, allowing inbound visitors to understand these matters from the outset. Could you tell us more about this?

Oyama: We are already working in coordination with the Japan Tourism Agency, and there are disaster-information apps that

support multiple languages. Taking these tools into account, we believe it is necessary to cooperate with relevant ministries and agencies to provide information on a wide scale to foreign residents and visitors.

Community-Based Disaster Risk Reduction

JS: As you mentioned earlier regarding cooperation with local governments, it seems that you place significant emphasis on community-based disaster risk reduction. I believe that comprehensive and strategic systems for disaster resilience, including urban planning, as well as community-integrated disaster risk reduction education are essential. If you have any specific ideas or initiatives under consideration, could you share them with us?

Oyama: Until recently, disaster risk reduction education had traditionally been conducted mainly through schools. Starting in FY 2025, under the leadership of the Cabinet Office, we launched a model project on community-based disaster risk reduction education. This initiative aims to promote more practical disaster risk reduction education that actively involves local communities.

The members of the model project include not only local government officials and schoolteachers, but also key community figures involved in disaster risk reduction, such as leaders of voluntary disaster risk reduction organizations and heads of neighborhood associations. They participate as partners in community-based disaster risk reduction education, working with the community to consider how lives can be protected during a disaster. In practical terms, it is important to discuss in advance matters such as who will assist elderly residents in the event of a disaster. We believe that strengthening these kinds of community connections, even slightly, will help communities build relationships that enable mutual support when a disaster occurs.

JS: In large metropolitan areas, relationships between neighbors tend to be weak, so I imagine it may be difficult for places like Tokyo to build strong relationships. What are your thoughts on this?

Oyama: That, too, is indeed a challenge unique to urban areas. For example, in city centers, high-rise condominiums are common, and many households live next to each other without the close neighborly relationships of the past. In such settings, it becomes important for condominium managers and residents to discuss in advance how they will support one another when a disaster occurs, and to consider what disaster risk reduction should look like in this kind of environment.

In urban areas, we need to consider that there will inevitably be a greater demand for water, food, and other daily necessities during a disaster. For residents living on upper floors of high-rises, where the building itself may already have adequate seismic reinforcement and other necessary measures in place, it is also important for each household to maintain its own stock of food, water, and other supplies. This ensures that they can protect themselves and remain safe at home for a certain period if a disaster occurs.

Growth Potential of the Disaster Risk Reduction Industry

JS: Disaster risk reduction and national resilience is one of the 17 strategic sectors identified by the Cabinet of Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi, and I believe it has considerable potential as a new industry. How do you view the development potential of the disaster risk reduction industry?

Oyama: Japan has been struck by disasters countless times, and while advance disaster risk reduction measures are of course essential, recovery and reconstruction projects have also been carried out across the country after each disaster. Through both the development of preventive infrastructure and the subsequent recovery and reconstruction efforts, various industries have accumulated technologies and expertise in many forms. Even so, I believe the disaster risk reduction industry still has considerable room for further growth.

Within this context, it is important for the Disaster Management Agency to identify and draw out the technologies that companies already possess which can be applied to such efforts, and to support them in bringing those technologies to the broader market. For example, there are individuals responsible for disaster response among local governments and private companies, and by creating opportunities to match these people, who have specific needs, with companies that possess relevant technologies, we can help bring those technologies into wider use. Ultimately, I hope we can build a system in which these technologies circulate throughout society and, over time, contribute to an economic cycle that forms a fully-fledged disaster risk reduction industry. To begin with, we will need to conduct a comprehensive inventory of what kinds of disaster risk reduction technologies currently exist.

JS: I feel that much depends on whether we can genuinely share the importance of disaster risk reduction with the public. In that sense, disaster risk reduction education – that is, activities aimed at raising awareness and promoting understanding – is extremely important.

Oyama: This applies not only to companies but also to residents: each and every individual needs to recognize disaster risk reduction as something they must actively engage in. The key is how we can make disaster risk reduction a natural part of daily life. In other words, by minimizing the boundary between everyday life and the extraordinary circumstances of a disaster, a concept we refer to as “phase-free”, it becomes important to create systems in which the technologies and tools people use on a daily basis can also be used during emergencies.

When technologies are already part of everyday life, they tend to spread widely and naturally. When it comes to “disaster risk reduction technology”, although the demand for large-scale infrastructure equipment such as heavy machinery may exist, it may not be the same for tools used by the general public unless elements are incorporated that make them suitable for daily use. I believe this perspective is crucial.

Enhancing International Collaboration

JS: Asian countries have shown strong interest in the future activities of Japan’s Disaster Management Agency, and institutions such as the Asian Development Bank also have high expectations. In Asia, countries like the Philippines and Indonesia experience major earthquakes and tsunami, and I understand that a cooperative framework with Asian nations has been built since the Great East Japan Earthquake. Looking ahead, do you have any thoughts on how this might progress?

Oyama: Based on our intention to continue the cooperative frameworks we have established with various countries up to now, bilateral cooperation will of course remain important, but multilateral cooperation will also become increasingly significant. Next year, in 2027, the Asia-Pacific Ministerial Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction is scheduled to be held in Sendai. For us at the Disaster Management Agency, not only will organizing and hosting such a conference be important, but it will also serve as a valuable opportunity to communicate Japan’s disaster risk reduction initiatives internationally and to strengthen collaboration with countries overseas. At that time, we hope to demonstrate our commitment to advancing disaster risk reduction efforts even more by showing that Japan has launched a new organization – the Disaster Management Agency – and reinforced its institutional capacity. We intend to prepare thoroughly so that we can convey that message effectively.

The Agency’s Commitment

JS: Finally, looking ahead, what does the Disaster Management Agency aim to achieve? In other words, once this initiative is fully on track, do you have a picture of what Japan’s disaster risk reduction landscape might look like? For example, do you envision the emergence of new types of disaster-resilient cities, or a situation in which both disaster risk reduction and mitigation are strengthened, leading to a more resilient national infrastructure? It may be difficult to say much at this stage, but if possible we would appreciate any insights you can share.

Oyama: As I mentioned earlier, our aim is to make disaster risk reduction something that naturally becomes part of daily life, to create an environment in which everyone feels that “disaster risk reduction is something we all need to engage in.” I believe the Disaster Management Agency can play a central role in building that kind of environment.

I believe it is essential that people first develop an awareness of disaster risk reduction. Of course, we want every citizen to take measures such as stockpiling supplies during normal times, but even when a disaster does occur, it is equally important to restore essential functions as quickly as possible and to have a vision in advance for rebuilding communities in a way that makes them even better than before. With all of this in mind, we hope to take a broad, long-term view of what Japan’s disaster risk reduction system should look like and to create an environment in which disaster risk reduction can be thoroughly advanced.

JS: That is certainly an important point. It is easy to speak of changing mindsets, but in practice it is quite difficult, and I believe the real challenge is yet to come.

Oyama: To do so, we need to take the lead and carry out the responsibilities we are expected to fulfill.

JS: We sincerely hope you will continue with your efforts. Thank you very much for taking the time to speak with us today.

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Written and translated by Naoyuki Harada, advisor to Japan SPOTLIGHT, with the cooperation of Tape Rewrite Co.