

# The Great Quake and Volunteers

By Hamano Takayoshi



Photo: Kyodo News Service

Disaster victims receiving supplies from hardworking relief volunteers.

The January 17th Great Hanshin Earthquake, centering on Kobe and neighboring cities and killing more than 5,000 people, shocked the nation. As the devastating scenes of the affected areas appeared on TV and in the press, I found myself at a loss of words and could only feel sorrow. Now, three months following the disaster, restoration activities have been gaining momentum. Still, it is believed that it will take considerable time for victims to secure a place to live and settle down.

Within two weeks of the earthquake, 67 countries and territories from around the world offered assistance. Only 29 offers of material and monetary aid, however, were accepted by the Japanese government, inviting scathing criticism. Facing an unprecedented disaster, the government proved incapable of immediately formulating policy, and in this sense, the earthquake revealed weakness-

es in the risk-control system in Japan.

The great quake also spurred a new form of mutual help among people. Such a show of volunteerism from both Japanese and foreigners may never have been seen before in Japan.

## Young volunteers

Day after day, the media reported in detail the activities of volunteers working hard to help quake victims. In early February, NHK television reported on a story of a young construction engineer from Niigata who had driven his small truck hundreds of kilometers to Kobe to survey and repair the roofs of damaged houses, mainly of the elderly. "This is exactly like meeting Buddha in hell," was the tearful thanks expressed by a woman living in one of the houses he repaired.

"Emotional Care Network" is a group that is trying to share the victims'

"pains" of deprivation of family, homes and local communities, as well as the stress caused by living in shelters for prolonged periods. Others released information through PC networks about people's whereabouts and helpful information on daily-living that the PC users themselves had collected. Also, volunteer nurses visited shelters, and free hair cuts and delivery of aid materials were made available by members of volunteer groups. No one has an accurate count of how many volunteers were there, but the total number is estimated to have reached in the tens of thousands.

"Although myself and my family were all right," said a volunteer in Kobe, "seeing those who were utterly at a loss in front of their collapsed houses, I felt I must do something." The statement reveals the psychology that drove people into volunteer activities.

Yet, some local governments

appeared to have been unprepared to receive so many offers and were unable to find jobs for them. For example, the Kobe City Disaster Measures Headquarters alone had 7,200 volunteers registered by the end of January, but only a small number were actually assigned tasks. The rest are believed to have joined citizen group activities, or started something by themselves.

According to a survey by a citizen's group, approximately 60% of the volunteers were young people between the ages of 15 and 25, and that among the rest, the higher the age group, the lower their representation. This suggests young people were more inclined to offer themselves for volunteer activities, prompting volunteer activities led by youth to bloom.

### Support measures

Witnessing this activity, Chief Cabinet Secretary Igarashi stated in the Diet on January 27 that the government would consider the legal status of volunteer organizations, preferential tax treatment for donated monies, and compensation for damages in case volunteers are involved in second (relapsing) disasters. Following the statement, 18 concerning ministries and agencies set up a Liaison Committee Concerning the Volunteer Issue, with its office in the Economic Planning Agency, to discuss these questions and to produce provisional conclusions by the summer. Reportedly, political parties have also begun to consider their own measures to support volunteers.

The question of legal status of volunteer organizations may require some explanation. If those organizations are ranked as public-service corporations, they become eligible for tax breaks as well as other benefits which corporations are entitled to, which would greatly facilitate their activities. However, it is not easy to obtain the status of corporation as the current Japanese legal system has set rigid qualifying requirements. So the government is considering how to make it easier for volunteer organizations.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Education has requested that universities allow

credits to those students who volunteered. Already, 63 universities, or more than 10% of all Japanese universities, are giving credit for volunteer activities mainly for students majoring in welfare-related studies. The ministry is trying to expand the application of such a system. I strongly hope that the government will adjust the system to encourage these activities and promote volunteerism, which might wane in the future otherwise.

### Reality and motivations

The Japanese have never experienced a social revolution such as has occurred in the West. It has often been pointed out that Japanese are poorly aware of their civil rights as they lack the experience of realizing by themselves a society based on the notion that all humans are equal and free. Some have criticized the Japanese for not insisting on their rights while not taking responsibility, and relying too much on the government.

However, now we see people who were untouched by the earthquake stand up to "do something if they can help." They extended their hands to help victims, abandoning the comfortable position of observer who leaves everything to the hands of national and local authorities, doing nothing but blaming the government if it responds poorly. Some remain cautious, questioning if these extensive volunteer activities in response to a natural disaster would lead to an increase in volunteers for more permanent activities, such as care of the elderly. To this question, more time is required to get the answer. However, my personal opinion is that something decisively has changed. As one of the victims said "The Japanese are not so bad in the end," after receiving help from volunteers.

According to the Poll on Preference in National Living conducted in June 1993 by the EPA, 6.5% of those surveyed were "currently involved," and together with those who "used to do," 21.7%, or one out of every four, have experienced volunteer activities. Moreover, in some regions, people often maintain the tradition of mutual help among relatives and neighbors,

which they do not perceive as volunteer work and did not appear in the survey.

The survey also shows that the stronger one's satisfaction with life, the higher the provability for that person to be involved in volunteer activities. Compared to the one in every two Americans or Britons who have worked as volunteers, volunteer activities seem still weak in Japan.

However, the survey shows that 65% are more or less willing to participate in volunteer activities. So many are willing, but only a few actually do so because, I believe, conditions are not met. Typical conditions for potential volunteers are "to be able to participate for only a limited time (one to two hours a day)" and "the job is so easy that anyone can do it."

Yet, according to statistics from the National Committee of International Conference of Social Welfare, the number of volunteers has risen sharply: members of volunteer groups rose from 1.60 million in 1980 to 4.28 million (in 53,069 groups) by March 1991. The figure may rise further after the recent earthquake.

One reason for the recent increase in volunteer activities seems to be the sentiment that one could have easily been a victim if things were slightly different. It may also be that the Japanese have become wealthy enough to be able to extend help to others, or from the beginning the Japanese tend to pay much respect to the society and group.

Although it does not necessarily mean an establishment of civil consciousness in the Western sense among the Japanese, the rise in voluntary activities, mainly among young people grown in an era of affluence, to support people in trouble could be explained by the feeling that some Japanese have started to behave differently from the conventional way. Would it be too rash to think that the Japanese, who tend to be regarded as different from Westerners, have begun to change themselves, starting with their youth? ■

*Hamano Takayoshi is a news commentator at NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation).*