

Reflections from Tohoku

A JCIE team visited several hard-hit towns Tohoku on June 17-19 in order to speak with NGO leaders, government officials, and local citizens about their communities' needs and how outside aid can be directed most effectively. Following are the reflections of JCIE/USA Executive Director Jim Gannon.

Friday, June 17

* Before departing for Tohoku, I have spent the week in Tokyo with a delegation of 15 American scholars and policy experts meeting with a wide range of Japanese leaders from different sectors of society. The aim was to discuss US-Japan relations in general, but 3/11 comes up as the main topic in almost every meeting, with most people expressing gratitude for the extraordinary response of the US military as well as the donations of the American people.

As we meet with people farther and farther from the traditional power sources, the more dynamic the conversation becomes and the more we feel a sense of mission. Many of those with whom we speak cite the revitalization of Tohoku's economy as the top priority now, and there is much talk of searching for new ways to promote entrepreneurship and venture philanthropy. The meetings with some of the country's leading entrepreneurs are especially animated as they speak passionately about the need to create a new Japan. It is only when we talk about Japan's domestic politics that the tone turns ugly. It is clear that the level of public disgust with political maneuvering and the Kan administration's perceived lack of decisiveness in responding to the disaster is extraordinarily high, even if it is difficult to envision how much more the leaders of any other developed country might have done.



Clean up efforts in Iwate Prefecture

* We catch the last bullet train out of Tokyo Station that will take us to Iwate, the poorest and most remote prefecture hit by the full strength of the tsunami. Surprisingly, the train is packed, with people standing in the aisles. It is Friday, and many of them are heading north from Tokyo to volunteer over the weekend before returning to work on Monday. All is normal until we pull into Fukushima City, which has had radioactive hotspots although it is outside of the 12 mile no-go zone around Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Plant. Nobody gets off of the train and the platform is completely deserted, a scene that is jarring for those accustomed to traveling in Japan. Even more striking is the eerie sight of the city. Office buildings are clustered around the station, just as they are in most of Japan's larger cities, many standing 10 or 15 stories high. However, there are only two or three lights turned on in each.



Many travel to Tohoku on the weekends to volunteer with relief effort

* Tomorrow we head to Kamaishi on the coast, which has been hard hit by the tsunami.

Saturday, June 18

* Today marks the 100th day since the tragedy of March 11. We arrive at Shin-Hanamaki Station at 9:05 am to catch the local train for the two hour ride to Kamaishi. The ticket booth seems permanently closed, and the station is so small that it has no facilities save for a 10 foot by 10 foot waiting room with six seats. About half of the 30 odd passengers boarding the three-car train appear to be going to the coast to volunteer. This includes one family of four—the father, mother, and two teenagers –who came all the way from Hokkaido to volunteer for the weekend. Somebody has placed notebooks in the waiting room for passengers to write down their thoughts and the most recent one, Notebook #9, starts from early April when the train line resumed partial service. Almost all of the entries are from volunteers heading east into the disaster zone: one from a trio from Kobe who had themselves been helped by outsiders during the 1995 earthquake; others from Tokyo, Osaka, and other large cities; and one all the way from Los Angeles. Under each of the hundreds of entries, the caretaker of the notebook carefully added a response in red ink—“Thank you for coming to help out,” “It means so much that you would travel from so far away,” “Your being here encourages us to fight harder.” It is easy to see the strength of Japan’s countryside.



Notebook at Shin-Hanamaki Station

* Winding through the mountains on the tiny train to Kamaishi, everything looks normal. The first sign that anything is out of the ordinary is the small group of Self-Defense Force troops parked near the station and the three-story-high pile of rubble a few blocks down to the left, which is neatly placed in the yard of the Nippon Steel factory. Other than that, the town seems to be functioning normally, indeed with a lot of traffic for a Saturday morning. But when we take a left and walk over the bridge into the center of the old town, it feels as if we are descending into a nightmare. In the area that the tsunami swept through, the first floors of buildings have been left as ragged skeletons while everything looks to be fine from the second floor up. As we go farther downhill toward the port, the damage spreads to the second stories and then to the third. The rubble is everywhere in neat piles with crumpled cars and trucks sticking out at strange angles, mixed in with the odd boat. In places, it looks as though somebody drove a large snow plow through, just instead of snow they pushed pieces of homes and lives into large mounds on the side of the road.



Boat among the rubble

* We scramble up the stairs to the third floor of an old office building to meet with a local organization called the “@Rias NPO Support Center.” The first floor looks as though it used to be a retail shop, but the walls have been washed away, and people are now using it as a makeshift parking garage. When we get inside and sit down with the head of the organization, we are immediately captivated by his energy and optimism in talking about the future he envisions for Kamaishi. This is all the more striking because we know that his wife is among the city’s 400 missing, even though none of us dare to broach the topic. He had been running his nonprofit for years on the side of his daytime job, but he insists that he is no expert on NGOs. Rather, he says, he is just a baker who wants to reopen his cake shop and so he believes he needs to help create a new town where people are happy and feel comfortable walking around eating cakes. Kamaishi has been in decline for several decades as the local steel plant continued to shed jobs, so he sees this as



The freighter “Asia Symphony” was washed onto the Kamaishi pier

a chance for the city to shift into new industries that can help counter long-term trends by giving families and young professionals a reason to stay. He explains that there needs to be a critical mass of stores and businesses to draw people back to town, so Japan Platform (which receives some support through JCIE's fund) has just partnered with his group to rebuild the central shopping arcade. One problem, though, is that if local businesses that have had no income for three months cannot hang on through the next few months, there will be little to revitalize.

* In the middle of our meeting, we get a call to come see the Kamaishi mayor. The city has set up a disaster response center on the second floor of a tiny shopping mall, and Mayor Noda has a line of visiting groups waiting to see him. One of the problems, he says, is that many of the younger people have been leaving for years to look for work elsewhere. As a result, Kamaishi's population resembles an upside-down pyramid, with many senior citizens at the top and a shrinking base of young workers. So, he argues, the biggest long-term challenge is to create jobs for young people.



Mayor Noda outlines the disaster response

* Taro Edami of the Fuji Welfare Foundation has guided us around the city for the day, drawing on the connections he has from working with the city over the past three years on an economic revitalization initiative. His staff join from the local revitalization center he has helped establish, and I get a laugh when I ask one what he does over the weekend when he has time off. He jokingly responds, "Time off?" although he later admits that, since arriving in Kamaishi on April 1, he actually did allow himself to take off one weekend day.

* Edami explains that one fear is that, as time drags on, displaced residents living in temporary housing will eventually decide that there is no reason to stay in a town with no shops, restaurants, or jobs. He and his colleagues have devised an innovative "Kitchen Car Project" that is investing in the establishment of a small fleet of food trucks. These trucks are rented to local chefs and the plan is for them to gather in areas around town to provide low cost, high quality fare, in the process stimulating other local economic activity and making the city a more desirable place to live. Eventually, they hope, this will also provide a path back to restaurant ownership for the participating chefs.



Food trucks from the Kitchen Car Project

Sunday, June 19

* Early in the morning we leave for Rikuzen-takata, which has become famous as one of the hardest-hit towns. Roughly 10 percent of its population of 24,000 is either dead or missing. On the road into town we stop at the volunteer center, where hundreds of volunteers arrive each day to be dispatched throughout the area to pick up rubble and shovel the mud left behind by the tsunami. The staff work out of a string of trailers surrounded by vibrant green rice paddies, and most of their leaders are drawn from the local social welfare council. In many rural parts of Japan, including Iwate Prefecture, there are few nonprofit organizations, and the local social welfare councils play an especially important role. While they are quasi-governmental organizations, they are often close to nonprofit organizations in both outlook and practice and carry out various social services in more flexible ways than government agencies.



Rikuzen-takata volunteer center

Six of the 15 staff of the Rikuzen-takata Social Welfare Council were swept away by the tsunami and a 7th lost a spouse, but the others have been manning the volunteer center without rest since it was opened on March 17. The head, an impressive woman in her 30s, puts on a cheerful face as she guides us around their operations. However, her face darkens when she tells the story about how she clung to the roof of the City Hall as the wave hit. Instead of escaping, many of the people in the City Hall stayed behind to warn others in town about the incoming tsunami. By the time she and her colleagues decided to flee, it was too late to drive to safety, so instead they made their way up to the fourth floor of the building. As the water continued rising, it became clear that they would have to go higher, so they started to climb the narrow staircase up to the roof. The man next to her insisted that she go before him, and she scrambled up the stairs just as the waters hit. She looks down as she tells us that nobody knows what came of him.



The remains of Rikuzen-takata City Hall

* After the volunteer center, we head to a local elementary school on top of a nearby hill. Every patch of flat public land on high ground is being put into use for the relief effort, and nearly 100 temporary houses have been built here for 311 people. They are remarkably clean and orderly, although they feel oppressive in their uniformity. A group of tea ceremony teachers from the neighboring prefecture has set up tents on the lawn nearby to perform tea ceremonies for the residents of the houses. Life in the temporary houses can become depressing, so they feel it is important that the residents, many of whom are suddenly unemployed, can have different activities each week in order to break the routine and keep their minds off of their troubles.



Children outside of temporary housing

Koichiro Yamashita from the Japan National Council of Social Welfare has been escorting us through the area for the day, and he explains that his organization is hoping to set up more permanent outreach centers in towns and cities throughout the disaster zone that will sponsor similar activities on a regular basis. As time drags on, depression and suicide are likely to become a larger problem, but the very people who are at the highest risk are least likely to seek counseling on their own, particularly in more rural places such as Iwate Prefecture. So these centers can allow them to indirectly connect with a wide range of people in the community and insert themselves into local networks, hopefully helping them to identify those at risk and to build the types of relations that will make it easier to encourage them to seek counseling when needed.

* So this is what hell looks like. There is a famous photograph of Hiroshima after the atomic bombing that shows an open expanse of rubble with a lone building—what later came to be called the Peace Dome—still standing in the distance. From the center of what was downtown Rikuzen-takata, it is easy to imagine what the photographer in Hiroshima must have felt. All that remains are the shells of a handful of concrete and steel buildings, with most of the rest obliterated down to the foundations. The destruction stretches for nearly a mile in each direction, with almost nothing to obstruct the view. And it is the silence that is most disturbing—the only sound is the wind blowing.



Downtown Rikuzen-takata

The City Hall was four stories high, but even the windows on the fourth floor have been blasted out by the tsunami and ragged curtains trail out of the windows like dirty party

streamers. A field of cars lies in front of the City Hall, each crumbled up like old tin foil. Half a block away is the remains of the police station, and somebody has placed a vase of white flowers and a group photo of the policeman inside the entrance. Some rubble remains, but much of it has already been cleared away. The newspapers are full of criticism of the government for how long it is taking to clean up the rubble, but when one sees the scope of the destruction, it seems a wonder that even this much could be accomplished in just three months.



Inside the police station

* Jionji Temple sits on a hillside overlooking an inlet a few miles from downtown Rikuzen-takata, and it has been serving as an evacuation center. Abbot Furuyama welcomes us and relates what he saw March 11. People from the neighborhood fled to the temple when the tsunami warning went out, then as the waters reached the temple they fled into the graveyard on the hill above it. Fortunately, the temple was spared, and it became a temporary home for dozens of families who lost their homes farther down the hill. Many have since moved into temporary housing, but they still convene at the temple each day for meals and other gatherings. Sunday's lunch—ramen and yakitori (grilled chicken)—is provided by the staff of a nonprofit organization called NPO Arata, who have been regularly travelling from Yamagata Prefecture to cook for people at the temple and elsewhere. More than the food, it seems that the people coming to eat appreciate the smiling faces and easy camaraderie of the volunteers.



Postscript

As we return to Tokyo on the evening of Sunday, June 19, many of the seats on the train are taken up by volunteers with hiking backpacks coming back from the disaster zone. Once back in the capital, though, the disaster seems very far away, and I am struck even more by the gap in perceptions. The mood of people close to the traditional power centers—politicians, journalists, bureaucrats, and staid business executives—is dark and deflated. In contrast, many of those whom we met in the Tohoku region, both residents who have mobilized and those from the outside who are working for its recovery, emit a quiet sense of mission and can-do attitude. Of course, this is a select group and they have to struggle every day to put on a strong face, but speaking with them gives one extraordinary hope, making one believe that Japan can do anything it sets out to do.



After NPO Arata's lunch at Jionji Temple

In fact, in talking with people around the country it is easy to get the impression that the disaster may have cracked open a psychological dam. It is widely reported that the number of marriages jumped after March 11, and some whisper that the number of divorces also did. People are trying to register hundreds of new nonprofit organizations, ad hoc volunteer groups have sprung up around the country, and even Japanese overseas seem mobilized to help in some way with the recovery. Essentially, it seems that many people finally feel free to do things that they have put off for years out of a sense of restraint and an aversion to risk. It is unclear whether this momentum can be maintained, but if so one wonders if we may be seeing the start of a bottom-up reinvigoration of Japanese society. This certainly would help. Clearly, business as usual will not suffice to deal with this tragedy; rather new approaches are needed if the Tohoku region is to recover from a disaster of these proportions.