

## Talking points of IDM, Sep. 13-14

Akihiro Izumi

Humanitarian Assistance and Emergency Relief Division, International  
Cooperation Bureau, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan

It is a great honor for me to be able to give a speech about the Japanese governments' experience on how to respond to foreigners during the Great East Earthquake in 2011. I was not responsible for supporting foreign nationals in Japan after the earthquake but I would like to make a presentation in this IOM conference as a person responsible for IOM matters in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan.

### I What happened

First of all, I would like to talk about what happened in Japan last March. On the 11th March 2011, at 14:46, a huge earthquake with a Magnitude 9.0 struck. This was the largest earthquake on record in Japan. After this earthquake, The ensuing tsunami swept across many cities and villages along the Pacific coast of the North area of Japan, causing tremendous human and structural damage. The earthquake and tsunami resulted in emergency situations including failure of the reactor-cooling systems in nuclear power stations in Fukushima Prefecture. The number of deaths was more than 15,000 (including 23 foreigners), the number of injured was around 6,000 (including 173 foreigners), and the number was and remains more than 3,000.

Power, gas, and water supplies were disrupted in many areas, mostly in the Northern region. Roads, railways, airports and other infrastructure were also severely damaged.

When the earthquake struck, 33,600 foreigners lived in the three main affected prefectures, and 200,000 foreigners lived in the surrounding prefectures. 423,000 foreigners were estimated to be visiting the area for various reasons at the time. In total, about 700,000 foreigners were in the affected area.

### I MOFA

Confronted with this crisis, we, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan started to play two main roles. One was the dissemination of Information for

Foreigners, and the other is confirming the safety of foreign nationals.

#### 1. Dissemination of information

(1) Immediately after the earthquake, we set up a special board on the website of the MOFA to disseminate information about the earthquake and we continued to update our information as frequently as possible.

(2) In our 2<sup>nd</sup> role, we made briefings about the situation in the area damaged by the earthquake, tsunami, and power station failure to foreign embassies in Japan continuously. In conjunction with other ministries and agencies, we provided information about support systems available for the population including foreigners who were affected by the earthquake.

(3) We also disseminated information over the national radio network which was broadcasting in 17 languages including Thai and Bengali.

(4) Additionally in coordination with the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry and its agency, we gave briefings on the situation for foreign companies.

#### 2 Confirmation of the safety of foreign nationals.

(1) Immediately after the earthquake, we have cooperated with embassies in Japan, police agencies and local administrations. Additionally we were on working on confirming the safety of foreign nationals. We asked the foreign embassies in Japan about missing foreign nationals residing in Japan after the earthquake. Thus, we made a list of missing persons, which listed more than 600 names, and shared the updated list with police agencies. We also provided the list to some local governments.

It was challenging to confirm the safety of those persons on the list because many of the foreigners had already left the area.

(2) We made great efforts to confirm the safety of missing foreigners. For example, based on the information provided by local governments, Immigration Bureau, and the Police agency, we made phone calls to the working place of those people and schools of foreign children.

(3) In cooperation with the national police agency, we held several briefings for embassies in Japan regarding the progress of the safety confirmation of foreign nationals.

(4) We also made safety confirmations for foreign exchange students and trainees who were invited to Japan through the Japanese Government. This process was completed by March 13.

( 5 ) We also sent several officials of Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the affected area (namely Iwate and Miyagi), including officials who spoke Chinese.

3. Support was also provided to foreign embassies in Japan to protect their own nationals and support foreigners leaving Japan

Foreign Embassies in Japan made efforts to protect their own nationals by several means such as chartering airplanes for evacuation. Other embassies sent officials in cars to evacuate their nationals from the affected area. We coordinated with the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism to obtain permission to land the chartered airplanes and to assist procedures for embassies staff to enter the affected area.

## II MOJ

Ministry of Justice made extraordinary measures to respond to the foreigners during the crisis.

### 1. Early Issuance of Visas

Visas were early issued for family members of foreign residents, NGO and other support people to come to Japan to assist victims in coordination with the Immigration Bureau.

### 2. Special Measures

Special measures were made for foreign nationals who wished to stay or come back to Japan. For example the Ministry extended the reentry permissions and made it possible for foreigners whose visas were not valid to obtain new visas under special conditions.

### 3. Eased management of the Certificate of Eligibility

Thirdly MOJ eased the management of the Certificate of Eligibility. There is a system in place to identify foreigners by the certificate of eligibility for a visa in Japan. After the earthquake, the Ministry eased the management of the certificates to some extent.

- The Ministry accepted the visa applications without new certificates after foreign trainees and technical interns returned home owing to the earthquake.
- International students who returned home due to the occurrence of the

Earthquake did not have to obtain new Certificates to acquire new visas. Foreign nationals were able to continue to use their certificates as valid even after the elapse of expiring date for an extra three months and their certificates were treated as valid when they filed applications for visas.

#### 4. Collaboration with IOM

IOM started the humanitarian assistance program for foreigners to leave Japan in collaboration with the Ministry of Justice. Many embassies and foreign governments made efforts to help their own nationals to leave Japan but some of foreign nationals could not be assisted. Since IOM has been supporting for the victims of human trafficking, there were already coordination systems with concerned agencies to start this program. However, because of the breakdown of the telecommunication networks, the Staff of IOM and the officials of the Ministry of Justice went to the disaster area and explained to local administrations about this program. About 100 people used this program and were able to leave Japan. The number was small but it was effective as a safety net for foreigners who need humanitarian assistance to leave Japan.

### III Challenges and Lessons learned

#### 1. What we could do.

As you see now, the Government of Japan made great efforts to respond to foreigners during the Great East Japan Earthquake, through disseminating information, confirming the safety of foreign nationals, and supporting procedures for foreigners to leave or stay in Japan.

#### 2. What we could not do.

(1) However, we could not respond as quickly as we expected. It took a substantial period of time to set up communication net within the Ministry among the Ministries, and foreign embassies in Japan, including local administrations.

(2) In addition to that, we could not respond as efficient as we expected. Concerned Ministries, foreign Embassies, and local administrations all supported foreign nationals by different methods and did not share information. For example, local administrations did not know embassies activities to support their own nationals in their area.

### 3. Lessons learned

(1) Through these experiences to respond to the foreigners during the time of crisis, we found that, to prepare for a huge natural disaster like the earthquake, it was important to establish networks including information sharing not only within national level but also with organizations working on the ground level such as NGOs and local administrations where many foreigners live prior to the crisis. NGO played a major role to respond to the foreigners. Coordination with civil societies must be strengthened.

(2) It was also needed to coordinate the communication among supporters in the national level. The new frameworks coordinated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to assist the communication between the National Police Agency and foreign embassies were created. This framework can be used as a model case to support foreign nationals in the event of other national disasters.

(3) To make a platform for information sharing and coordination among supporters and concerned organizations, we set up an official facebook account for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for emergency situations. It is one of the test cases to use not only government assets but private assets to prepare for a disaster.

Thank you very much.