

Great East Japan Earthquake—A message from Japan II

## On-site Reports from the Area Affected by the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake and Tsunami

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I continually sent email reports of what I was seeing with my own eyes in the areas affected by the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake and Tsunami, mainly in Iwate Prefecture, from March 13th (two days after the earthquake) up until March 20th, 2011 to persons concerned. Iwate Prefecture is approximately 450 km north of Tokyo, from which it was an approximately 9-hour drive. I would like to introduce some of my reports here.

### March 13 (Sun), 2011—The first report

At the time of the earthquake (14:46 JST), I was in Jinbocho, Tokyo. The ground shook greatly. I walked from Yotsuya in Chiyoda ward to my home in Suginami. Telephone services were interrupted, as was public transport. Anyway, I was safe.

At 21:30, I arrived home after a 4-hour walk. My wife was also safe. She was at the Diet Members' Building with the wife of former Prime Minister Fukuda and had been recommended to stay there as it was a very safe place.

### March 13 (Sun), 2011—The second report

I have been dispatched from Nagasaki University to the disaster zone on a collaborative field mission with the AMDA. We plan to go in two cars, 6 people altogether. According to people who have been working in the disaster zone since shortly after the earthquake and have been returned to Niigata, there is still a high need for aid activities. Highways were broken in many places but it was possible to reach Sendai via Niigata taking the Kan-etsu and then the Ban-etsu Highways, a trip of 6–8 hours. At this moment our plan

is to base ourselves in Sendai, but there seems to be high demand further north, in Iwate. I do not know to what extent I can secure means of communication.

### March 14 (Mon), 2011

I have received replies from many people. I am very sorry that I cannot reply individually, but would like to share as much information as possible with many people. From Niigata, I traveled to Sendai. It took about six hours via the Tohoku highway. The centre of Sendai City is OK. Electricity services are coming in little by little. It seems that the tsunami did the greatest damage. I think the following comment by a doctor says it all.

Just once I had a chance to go by helicopter to assist patients in an isolated community. More than half of the houses and buildings had been destroyed in the tsunami. The meeting hall on a hill was crowded with displaced people. It was dark inside the hall because of the blackout and the injured came out after hearing the sound of the helicopter. I told a doctor doing triage there that I would transfer four severely injured patients to the hospital by helicopter. They were a patient needing dialysis and patients with suspected diabetic ketoacidosis, chest-pelvis trauma, and a broken right wrist, respectively. There seem to be a lot of communities where there is no doctor.

I am lost for words.

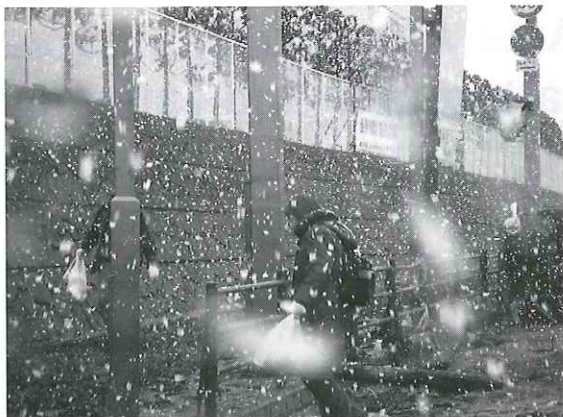
### March 15 (Tue), 2011

Today, as planned, I am heading north of Sendai, taking essential drugs with us from Hanamaki to

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A man carrying water through the snow



The town of Otsuchi

around Kamaishi and Otsuchi. Our 4-member group includes two nurses from Kamaishi and Otsuchi. We are worried about the accidents at the nuclear power plant in Fukushima Prefecture, so I decided that the volunteer students who accompanied me from Tokyo should return. If you have any information, please forward it to us.

#### March 16 (Wed), 2011

We arrived at Tono City in Iwate Prefecture last night. The aftershocks are continuing. Sleet and snow were falling on the city, which was blanketed in darkness. The temperature has fallen almost to freezing point. One of the doctors and one of the nurses who are with us are originally from Kamaishi/Otsuchi but left for Tokyo about 15 years ago when they graduated from high school and have been living there ever since. Their parents, siblings, friends, and acquaintances are in the towns that were severely damaged by the tsunami. Both of them came to Sendai thinking that even if they couldn't help in their hometowns, they would be happy just to be able to provide any support they can in the disaster zone.

They talk about having lost friends and acquaintances in Tono; they are acting as if they are fine, or trying to look fine, but we learned from the Haiti earthquake that this might actually be an expression of great sadness.

I feel like that this is an all-out battle. The feelings of the people inside the disaster zone and the people who are working to help them are the same. My love for my wife and my seven-year-old son grows stronger the longer I am here, but for the moment I need to turn these feelings towards

supporting survivors in the disaster-stricken areas.

I will be asking for your support soon.

#### March 17 (Thu), 2011—The first report

We left Tono and progressed along the Sanriku coast towards Kamaishi and Otsuchi. We arrived at Kamaishi in snow that had been falling since the previous night, even after we had traveled through the Senin Pass. The areas of the town along the road leading from Kamaishi Station to the coast were deeply scarred by the ravages of the tsunami. There are X marks on cars and houses indicating that they have already been checked. We went further north towards Otsuchi. As we came out of a tunnel, the nurse from Otsuchi who was sitting beside me driving the car mumbled, "Thank goodness it's snowing, as we can't see the scenery." The whole area was covered in snow. It's maybe a good thing that she didn't know whether she couldn't see the town that should be there because it was no longer there or because of the snow.

People who have supplies are scattered around the small towns of the Sanriku coast and other people are living in evacuation shelters in groups of 10s or 100s. Nagasaki University has commenced full-scale support activities in Tono, Kamaishi and Otsuchi, establishing support bases for the Tohoku Earthquake in these towns. We would also like to open these support bases to volunteers from all over the country.

#### March 17 (Thu), 2011—The second report

After conducting a traveling clinic at Kamaishi Junior High School, Kamaishi City Gymnasium,





An evacuation shelter

and Futaba Elementary School, we went further north from Kamaishi to Otsuchi and Kirikiri. On the way, we heard that there was an isolated nursing home that had not received any supplies. The building was an old Japanese-style restaurant called Koufuku-rou, ("Happy Inn") that had been converted into a nursing home. The road was blocked and it was going to be a 20-minute walk up a mountain, yet it was the female doctor who was with me who said, "Let's go!"

Luckily we could get some rice balls from an evacuation shelter. As we went up the mountain road, we were able to look out over the changed landscape of Kamaishi and the blue sea beyond. "Nothing's changed if you just look at the sea," said the young female doctor from Kamaishi.

There were about 20 elderly people at Koufuku-rou. There was a notice at the entrance that read: If you are able, please go to an evacuation shelter on your own.

The people there were very happy to receive the rice balls.

### March 18 (Fri), 2011

The first team of doctors and nurses and aid supplies arrived in Tono from Nagasaki at 4:30 on the morning of March 18th after a journey of 36 hours over land. The team set off immediately for the Sanriku coast and medical examinations, including a nighttime service, were commenced at the Otsuchi Archery Centre and Otsuchi Senior High School evacuation shelters where medical bases were set up. There was no electricity and no water supply, but the newly arrived doctors and nurses are staying at the evacuation

shelters because they want to better understand the feelings of the survivors.

I went to Towa, which is farther on from Tono, with an 81-year-old woman. An acquaintance was going to take her from Towa to Morioka, the capital city of Iwate. She had just had a valve replacement (heart) operation and her supply of medicine (Warfarin) had run out, so she was going to be examined at Iwate Medical University in Morioka. On the way, she told me that she didn't really want to go to Morioka. "I wouldn't want to go alone, but if I stay I will cause problems for everyone else," she said. This is her second experience of a tsunami. The first time was when she was four years old. It was at daybreak and she remembers a lot of bonfires lit on elevated ground.

"Even so, I never imagined that it would come to this," she said before falling silent.

The Nagasaki University Faculty of Fisheries training ship is currently on its way to the Sanriku area loaded with aid supplies. We expect the second medical team and more aid supplies to arrive tomorrow. Support from land and from the sea will converge on Sanriku. With a little luck, I think a lot of support will arrive. For now, I think we just need to hold strong.

### March 19 (Sat), 2011

On the 19th of March, we left Kamaishi and Otsuchi and passed through Kirikiri and Rikuzen Takada on the way to Miyako. It took about an hour. National Route 45 was opened between Kamaishi and Miyako the day before yesterday. The weather was good and the sky was clear and blue. I remember the comment by the young female doctor about just looking at the sea. The Nagasaki University training ship was moored in the harbor at Miyako; there were no other vessels moored there. The crew welcomed us when we arrived fairly late at the deserted harbor.

We loaded the medical and other supplies into the car and 2 doctors, a counselor and a medical student joined us as we headed to Otsuchi. When we arrived, we went to the two evacuation shelters that have been set up in a senior high school and an archery centre and began helping the local private clinicians and doctors from the prefectural hospital. One local doctor, who was also a survivor of the disaster, had been examining residents voluntarily but he could not hide his exhaustion. We substituted another doctor for him and took him for a run around the town

because he wanted to see what was going on outside. "This is terrible. Terrible," he said over and over again as he saw the outside world and the damage caused by the earthquake and tsunami for the very first time in a week.

My friend Taro Masuda contacted me to say that he has released a song called "Landscape of Hope." "I'm ready to go anywhere you might need me, so now I am spending all the time I can playing my violin in preparation for that day," he said. Mr. Masuda lost his sight when he was 20 years old but he says that it was music and the violin, which he had been learning to play since he was 5 years old, and had sustained him at that time.

There are 5,000 people in evacuation shelters in Otsuchi, which had a population of 16,000, but there are over 10,000 people still missing.

### March 20 (Sun), 2011

We are now in the former town archery center in Otsuchi, which is about 10km to the north of Kamaishi on the east coast of Iwate Prefecture. I have a story from here. A little boy came over

to me and asked, "What are you doing?" When I replied that I was making records, he asked, "Records?" I told him, "Yes," and asked him what his name was. "Kento," he replied. He told me he was 6 and in his last year at kindergarten. "So you're starting elementary school in April?" I asked him. "Yes," he said, "The kindergarten graduation ceremony was supposed to have been on the 19th." "But that was yesterday," I said. "Yes," he replied, and ran off to play with his little friend, Rie.

The Tohoku region was very badly damaged in the earthquake and subsequent tsunami, but there is still beautiful natural scenery. Someone said, "How beautiful the sunset is! It's incredible to think that earthquakes and tsunamis are acts of the same planet. It makes you think that even the expression 'co-existing with the earth's environment' is a human luxury." Nevertheless, people are starting to re-build their lives.

There was no kindergarten graduation ceremony, but I am thinking about what I can do for the futures of children like Kento and Rie. On that note, I will conclude my series of emails.

