Japan’s Response to a Large-Scale Disaster: Can It Be Improved?

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Leo Bosner is an emergency management specialist who participated in the Mike Mansfield Fellowship Program as a representative of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, from 1999-2001. During his Fellowship year in Japan, he served in full-time placements in Japan’s Defense Agency-Joint Staff Office (now the Ministry of Defense) and in the Tokyo Metropolitan Government’s Disaster Prevention Bureau. He learned how Japanese agencies prepare for and respond to disasters in Japan, and the extent to which the agencies coordinate with one another. Mr. Bosner was in Tokyo during the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake and is planning to study Japan’s response to the tragic events of March 11. He returned to Japan in June at the invitation of Toyo University and was able to view some of the devastated areas and meet with disaster survivors as well as responders. He shares his initial thoughts and questions about this response in the following commentary:

Summary

On March 11, 2011, a devastating earthquake and tsunami struck eastern Japan causing thousands of deaths and untold levels of property damage. Japanese authorities at all levels of government responded immediately to provide help and to rescue the survivors. They were assisted in this effort by numerous volunteers and by personnel and resources of various foreign governments as well as the private sector.

The rescuers worked tirelessly to provide lifesaving assistance and shelter to the survivors of the disaster, and their courage and dedication stand as a model for all. However, due to the suddenness and scope of the disaster, a number of problems arose in the course of the disaster response in such areas as communications, coordination, resource allocation, and other key areas.

As Japan may be subject to similar disasters in the future, it seems incumbent to examine and analyze the immediate response to the disaster, noting strong points of the response as well as areas in need of improvement. This should be done soon, while the events are still
Earthquakes have always been a fact of life in Japan, at times minor, at times devastating. The quake that hit the city of Kobe in January 1995 was devastating. Thousands were killed, injured, or made homeless, and the Japan government was roundly criticized for a slow, poorly coordinated response.

Afterward, Japanese officials started to look closely at the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for ideas on how to improve their preparedness for disasters. The FEMA of the 1990s was known for its rapid and effective disaster response system, so Japanese disaster specialists began to trek to Washington to learn about FEMA's system.

At that time, I was working at FEMA, specializing in disaster response planning. From 1996 through 1998, I made several trips to Japan to speak on this topic, and in 1999 I was selected for the Mike Mansfield Fellowship Program. Under that program, I spent about a year from 1999 to 2000 studying Japanese language in the Washington, D.C. area, then in the summer of 2000 left to spend a year in Tokyo as a fellow doing disaster-related research in full-time placements at what is now Japan’s Ministry of Defense as well as in the Tokyo Metropolitan Government’s Disaster Prevention Bureau. The focus of my study was, how did Japan – a country subject to numerous hazards such as earthquakes, volcanoes, and tsunamis – plan for and respond to large disasters?

During my year in Tokyo, numerous Japanese public and private agencies opened their doors to me and spoke candidly about this issue. These included civilian agencies of the Japan government as well as offices of the Japan Self Defense Force (JSDF), which hosted my visit for most of my time in Japan. I also met with doctors, nurses, fire service personnel, volunteers, academics…practically anyone I could find with a connection to disaster response.

At the local level, things looked pretty good at first. Hospitals did regular disaster drills, fire departments trained for disaster response, and local governments gave out brochures on personal preparedness for disasters.

But if a large-scale disaster would require more than just a local response, it appeared that there were numerous disconnects within the system, and that the Japanese would have a difficult time quickly mobilizing and coordinating the many agencies and organizations that would be needed following a massive earthquake or other major incident.

With the support of the Mansfield Fellowship, I researched this topic throughout 2000-2001, and in October 2001, I produced a report entitled, “Emergency Management in Japan.” In this report, I analyzed Japan’s emergency management capability and, while I found many strong points in the Japanese system, I also identified a number of systemic shortfalls, including, for example:
• Japan’s lack of a comprehensive, detailed national disaster response plan;

• Japan government agencies not familiar with each others’ disaster response plans and resources;

• The Cabinet Office Disaster Management Bureau’s small number of staff (50); and

• Lack of standard national emergency management training in Japan.

My report recommended several steps Japan could take to improve its emergency management capability, such as:

• Delegating emergency management authority to a single government agency, including sufficient staff and budget to perform its mission;

• Developing a detailed, comprehensive national disaster response plan;

• Professionalizing emergency management in Japan by establishing a national emergency management training curriculum and training center; and

• Increasing interagency coordination in disaster response planning, particularly the coordination between civilian agencies and the JSDF as well as with U.S. military assets stationed in Japan.

The report listed specific recommendations that could be followed to bring about improvements in the Japanese disaster response system. The report was translated into Japanese and published in the November 2001 issue of the Japanese journal, Rescue, and a short version of the report was published by the Mansfield Foundation in the Spring 2002 issue of the journal, Asia Perspectives.

In watching events in Japan unfold in the days and weeks following the March 11 disaster, I have wondered, how much has changed since 2001 or, for that matter, since 1995? What is the status of the Japanese disaster response system? Was the response to the Eastern Japan Earthquake as effective as it could have been? Have the problems experienced in the response to the 1995 Kobe quake been fully addressed?

While it is too early to state a definitive answer to those or other questions, it seems clear that a number of improvements have taken place. The SDF was dispatched much more quickly in 2011 than it had been in 1995, and coordination with U.S. military forces in Japan also seems greatly improved.

However, Japan still lacks a single national disaster response coordinating agency comparable to the U.S. FEMA, and when I returned to Japan in June at the invitation of Toyo University, I learned of numerous problems that cropped up in the course of the disaster response.
For example, communications at all levels broke down, and so surviving local officials in the stricken areas had no way of communicating their needs to higher authorities. One town official said his town received a huge shipment of dried noodles and other dried meals…but the town’s water supply had been destroyed, and without water the meals were useless. Disaster volunteers told me of complete confusion in the shipment of emergency foods, leaving some towns close to starvation while other towns literally had to throw away the extra food they had received.

The problems of responding to a disaster of this magnitude are certainly challenging, but they should not be overwhelming, particularly in a developed country such as Japan which is well aware of its many disaster risks. In order to identify planning shortfalls and perhaps help find ways to strengthen Japan’s disaster response system, I plan to conduct a small research study on the disaster response this summer and fall, in conjunction with colleagues at Kanagawa University in Yokohama, Japan, and the University of Maryland here in the U.S. While the study is still in the planning stage, it is not hard to identify some of the more obvious questions:

- What were some of the key issues of the initial response to the disaster?
- Which elements of the response seemed to go well, and which need to be strengthened?
- What sorts of unexpected problems arose? How were they handled? How could they be better handled next time?
- How were communications and coordination handled in order to make the best use of resources?
- How were non-government resources such as donations, volunteers, non-profit organizations, and the private sector utilized in the response?
- How were offers of assistance from foreign countries handled?
- How well and how quickly was the Japan government able to help local authorities to become re-established and re-organized?
- How was the physical and mental well-being of the rescuers themselves protected?
- Is there a potential conflict between the SDF’s role in disaster response and its duty to maintain national defense?
- What kinds of planning and training were done in advance of the disaster? Could these be improved?
If all goes well, my colleagues and I hope to report on our findings no later than March 2012.

Japan is a critically important friend and ally of the United States and, speaking personally, has become almost a second home to me because of the many good friends I have made there. The devastation I saw when I visited the Tohoku area was heartbreaking. I sincerely hope that this small research study can help support the efforts of my Japanese colleagues to strengthen their systems and protect their country as much as possible from the impacts of future disasters.

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