

Speech on Great East Japan Earthquake

The following is a speech given at Final Forum by Delegate Ikue Sasaki from Miyagi Prefecture. This word-for-word account tells of her first-hand experience living through the Great East Japan Earthquake.

My name is Ikue Sasaki from Tohoku Fukushi University and a participant of 63rd Japan-America Student Conference. I come from Miyagi Prefecture where it is close to the hypocenter of The Great East Japan Earthquake, which occurred on March 11th, at 2:46pm. On that day, broad area of this country seriously damaged by the disaster and many of cities were destroyed by the Tsunami and my city got great support from all over the world and country especially from Niigata and United states by Tomodachi Operation.

Taking this place, I would love to tell my great appreciation to all of you. Thank you very much for saving our life.

When I stand in destroyed areas, and looking the completely damaged houses, I feel empty and the meanings of positive words “Hope” and “Reconstruction” sounds nothing but I can find the Hope in people coming to volunteer even through heavy traffic on the high-way to Ishinomaki. Sincerely, thank you very much for your great support.

For now, I will give the presentation about the damage situations, support and issues for the reconstruction in Ishinomaki we have had since the disaster.

I hope this presentation will help you find out novel ideas for the reconstruction and raise our responsibilities as university students to ask what we can do and what's we needed for reconstruction.

I will show you where my city Ishinomaki is .It located in Miyagi Prefecture. I was born and raised in Ishinomaki and still live there.

Ishinomaki is very famous for its farming and fishing industries. And it's the second biggest city in the Miyagi Prefecture and it is located on the Sanriku coast and very close to the hypocenter. In addition, it's about 380km away from Niigata city.

If you look at this map, the tsunami was approaching from the ocean but it intersected with the canal which is represented by red line. At this point, the intensity of the tsunami was so strong that the water pushed the water from the river towards inner land. So the shelter was struck by the tsunami from behind rather than directly from the ocean. When the earthquake happened, I was waiting for the highway bus at the red point on the map.

The earthquake was too strong so I could not stay standing.

As soon as it stopped, tsunami sirens begin to warn us that a 10 meter tsunami was coming to my city so I hurried to go back to my home.

On the way back to my home, I felt I might die so put a name card on my body in case my mother needed to have a source of identification.

When I arrived at my company, I immediately helped our customers evacuate and guided them to the

nearby school. Then, I overheard a teacher announcing that a 2 meter tsunami would be approaching our area. So I rushed home to tell my mother that she would be safer on the second floor of the school. But she insisted that tsunami would never reach our house despite the emergency warning we had received.

Had I not heard the announcement I would not have been able to stop a staff to driving a customer home. Fortunately I had saved this customer's life because her house was washed away by tsunami. Sadly, my city got devastated by a tsunami so the number of death toll is the highest in Japan. Some people were washed away by the tsunami, but fortunately they have been found in other prefectures.

We lost 15,628 people by this disaster and 4,823 people are still missing. Every time I see those numbers, I imagine how many more people are still in distress and their families are still looking for their loved ones and each one of these dead and missing people is still loved by many people.

If my family members were still missing by the tsunami, I would believe they would come back to me soon and I would never be able to give them up for lost. I would not be convinced that their lives were taken away by tsunami.

I would expect someone I love to be found alive on the beach after washed away by the tsunami and to be rescued by someone else. Those who are searching for missing people might expect them to be found alive with complete memory loss, as is often seen in movies.

Time has passed over four months, but there are still 4,088 evacuees live in shelters such as schools and public centers in Ishinomaki. My city is trying to build 8,000 temporary shelters but only 730 of them were built until June.

I wonder why Ishinomaki City needs 8,000 temporary shelters. There are more people who need to leave their houses because they have subsidence caused by the earthquake and suffer from flooding once a month. People in that area are struggling with the subsidence but they have to concerns about living above or below the floor level flood.

But my city's flood-damaged area is wide-ranging, so for the sake of safety, we are not allowed to build houses in the tsunami-damaged area. Therefore, it is so difficult to find places for building temporary shelters. And temporary housing is not carefully designed for handicapped people and senior citizens. Most of those people have to live alone in the temporary shelters but it's very difficult to examine their lifestyles because they are isolated from communities.

Countless numbers of buildings and cars were struck by the tsunami, and although months have passed, the community is struggling to find a solution for the destroyed buildings and cars. The problem of rubble is not only about removing or cost but where and how to keep them is also the issue of it. And then, land pollution, air pollution by the scattering of the toxic substance such as Asbestos.

So many volunteers came to seriously damaged area by tsunami. But how to efficient volunteers is also problem. To compare Great Hanshin Earthquake, the number of volunteers is one third because in Tohoku area, the strong earthquake still happening often, radiation problem, inconvenient access for those areas, lack of accommodations. Those circumstances making less number of volunteers and Fukushima has least number of volunteers.

Additionally, we must remember that the other regions such as Niigata also experienced a strong earthquake on March 12th. While my area received great support at global level, I am concerned that not enough help has been given to regions such as Niigata.

From all over the world, a large sum of money was donated through the Japan Red Cross but most of the money has not reached the victims. Most of the money was sent to the city or town but the municipal governments have no idea how to divide the money into different areas because the municipal government does not grasp how many people evacuated out of the cities and where they live now. So most of those evacuees haven't received enough money yet. To make the matters worse, since the area's population has shrunk suddenly because of the tsunami, those circumstances prevent even distribution of money to victims.

There was cooperation between citizens. They cared and called their neighbors and evacuated to the shelters with groups of people. I also helped an 85-year-old-man who lived near my house. I saw him walking to the school alone so I took him to the shelter by wheel chair.

It was a big difference that most of school had graduation ceremony on that day so there were some teachers and students remaining. So we were able to go into the school smoothly, but if the earthquake happened in the middle of the night it would have made more damages.

The tsunami flooded a vast area so it was really difficult to get supplies from outside. But many of the restaurants and supermarkets voluntarily distributed their left over foods to the schools or public centers.

As soon as the situations of damaged areas were seen through the media, many supplies were delivered to those areas and volunteers came. Especially, those who previously experienced natural disasters in Niigata. So I was very impressed because their support was very efficient and organized. We can say that we learned from previous disasters and using the knowledge and understanding during this recovery process.

A remarkable number of people worked on rescue operation and the recovery of lifelines. Those people worked on rescue operation while they could not know if their own family members were safe or not, or even if their houses were washed away by tsunami and lost their family. Those official workers are also victims and human beings but took responsibility for emergency rescue operation during hard time without going back home.

And officially, the volunteer center in Ishinomaki was established right after the disaster occurred on

March 15th. This center managed the collection and distribution of supplies and sending volunteers. Also, the center was the base for international supporting teams.

The main point of my presentation is that this huge earthquake made disparity in people's life by levels of damages and that causing gap of support so that disturb our reconstruction by their selves.

City's classification of damages of buildings is too rough. City inspects the damages by areas where people used to live; you can't get any specific results. And city doesn't consider the number of deaths and missing people in those areas. So you can't receive exact amounts of financial support.

Although, two families both have their houses completely damaged, one family may get more money from the city than the other because they live in different areas.

If you consider different damages under different circumstances in the broad area with large population like Ishinomaki. City it's extremely difficult to distribute donation evenly to each resident in the disaster hit area. So the city government focuses on completely damaged or half damaged houses and residents who used to live in those areas are well supported by the city. However, those whose houses that had been damaged completely or half damaged are given priority, instead of giving priority to residents whose home were not inspected and damaged. These families continue to be left behind and will be the last to receive financial support.

Another issue we have is we need support at the stricken area, and there are a lot of areas where rubbles are remained and not collected yet. In addition, most of people lost a job by this disaster. They can receive unemployment insurance for a few months, but it is not easy to find a new work place.

Food was polluted by radioactivity by the first Fukushima nuclear power accident and many of industries affected by radiation. And People who were forced to evacuate lost their life of roots they had established for a long time.

And a lot of people extremely damaged physically. Our life had totally changed after March 11th so we are struggling to recover from physical damages such as giant earthquake and tsunami, nuclear power plant accident, catastrophic fire and sudden death. And I consider mental treatment should be given for people who worked on rescue operation, too, such as the self defense force and others.

We need to hurry support to the children who lost parents and brothers, a relative by an earthquake disaster. By this disaster, there are many cases all the family tended to die. There are many cases where children were left behind alone. We have to concern about increasing number of suicides among survivors. We have so many of struck handicapped people and senior citizens. They should be given more support and avoid from being neglected.

The topics I picked up for today's presentation is only a piece of the issues we have and I did not talk about my own experiences. For example, how was the damage my family got and how we survived.

Telling those stories and remembering the hard time is not very easy but I am here to tell everything I know about the disaster. I consider that reporting the damaged areas and challenge to reconstruction from this huge disaster is my role and reason of attending to JASC.

Taking this place, I would love to convey my great appreciation for Niigata citizens, my respect for United States of America, All the volunteers, executive committee members and everyone else who have supported me and my hometown.

Even though, this earthquake has affected the axis of the earth and shortened a time in a day. And Tsunami has destroyed the things we can see in our eyes, tsunami were not able to take away our spirit and my faith to attending the JASC.

Thank you very much to lead me to the JASC and JASC is the my hope for reconstruction from this disaster. --*Ikue Sasaki, Japanese Delegate to the 63rd JASC.*