



Disaster in Japan

Come back in ten years' time

KESENNUMA AND TOKYO

A heroic public spirit, but a weak state

EARLY on Sunday, nine days after the report of Kesennuma was turned into a watery, blazing morgue, people are trying to get back to work. A psychiatric nurse is pushing her bike through the mud, hoping to find the main road to the hospital. She can't. It is buried beneath piles of destruction-blackened skeletons of houses, shops with their guts spilled out, burned-out ships tossed half a mile inland.

Out of one deformed structure, a shopkeeper, Kanichi Mogi, emerges with a smile on his face and a computer under his arm. "My work PC! I found it!" he shouts.

Nearer the hospital, five men in overalls are winching rubble from the shipyard where they used to make 50 aluminium skiffs a year for the scallop trade. The boats, the foreman boasts softly, are sleek, energy-saving and recyclable. But they are all gone. Instead, a rusty trawler lies on its side on the forecourt, which the workmen eye as though a mongrel dog. Before the tsunami, it floated on the far side of the bay.

Kesennuma is on the north-eastern coast that bore the brunt of the tsunami on March 11th, leaving at least 25,600 dead or missing. With about 1,000 registered dead in the town, it fared better than nearby Ofunato and Rikuzentakata. But it was thrice blighted. After the earthquake and tsunami, fuel from the fishing boats caught fire, and for four days the port burned.

Unknown numbers of bodies lie amid the ashes, among them Chinese who worked in factories famous in Japan for processing sharks' fins. The tsunami rearranged the town: in the mud beneath a blackened hull lies a string of pearls.

Yet however much people are in turmoil, few mope. A spirit of revival is in the air. When the tsunami struck the psychiatric hospital, staff rushed 250 patients up to the roof to escape floodwaters that reached the third floor. Not even the patients panicked, says the nurse. Soon after she made it back to work on Sunday, a male hairdresser turned up offering to cut the patients' hair.

Nor are these isolated snapshots of public spirit. Almost every leg of a six-hour walk through the wreckage of Kesennuma showed people defiantly attempting to rebuild shattered lives. People expressed thanks for the solidarity the world had shown Japan. They were proud, too, that their indomitable spirit had been recognised. "Just you come back in ten years' time," was the refrain.

Still, the road out of this mess will be breathtakingly hard. That is not just because it will take many months to dig through a tangle of steel and concrete that stretches for hundreds of kilometres. And put aside the difficulties of choosing whether and how to rebuild on such a

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treacherous coast.

It is also because Japan has a political system so set in its ways that it has trouble adapting to creeping change, let alone emergencies on a biblical scale. Too often, the flip side of Japan's deference is an establishment able to blunder on without fear of protest and social strife.

This can hardly be missed in Kesennuma. Two men on the roof of a house were tinkering with their small boat that had been left perched by the tsunami. They were draining the outboard motor of fuel, so that they could fill up their car and drive off in search of food. For another disaster, this time largely man-made, has befallen the communities along the coast. A desperate shortage of fuel-and so food and warmth-is compounding the misery felt not only by the 260,000 homeless who have lost all, but also by those whose homes were spared.

And so people camped in refugee shelters in Kesennuma have only rice and hot soup. Red Cross staff say the soup lines are swelling with "food refugees", people who may have their homes but have no food, for the shops have run out.

The problem is bewildering. Along a 17-hour drive from Tokyo to Kesennuma, cars snaked in a line out of almost every petrol station. Hundreds of kilometres from the disaster area, restaurants and shops were shut. Petrol-pump attendants said fuel was being diverted to the tsunami-hit coast. Yet in Kesennuma, some waited a whole day and got just a 20-litre ration at the end of it.

For this, bureaucratic inflexibility is partly to blame. Shortly after the tsunami, Kouta Matsuda, an opposition senator and former boss of a nationwide coffee chain, drove a four-tonne lorry to his constituency in Miyagi prefecture, where Kesennuma ▶▶

- is located. He had to battle with authorities for permission to use trunk roads that were closed except for emergency vehicles. He said he found plenty of food at his destination, but no means of distributing it to the hardest-hit areas.

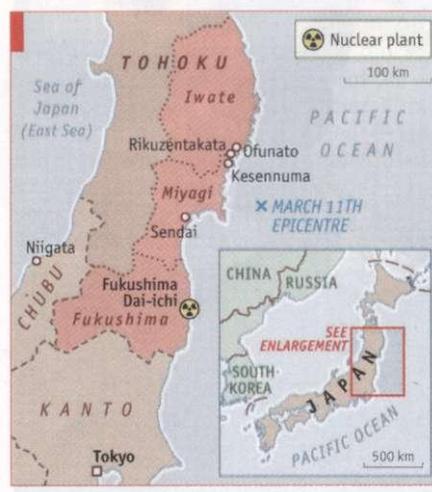
Later he used a friend's helicopter to fly food, medicines and mobile-phone chargers to Miyagi, but was refused permission to land. He asked if he could drop the supplies at the airport, hovering just a metre above the ground. Again, he was told this was against the rules.

Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI), which handles fuel distribution, lists many causes of the fuel crisis. Nario Kadono, an official redrafted from the private sector to handle the disaster, notes that the main refinery in the disaster-struck region is crippled, as were five other refineries near Tokyo. Three of those remain out of action. Freight-train services north were suspended for a week. There was also panic buying of petrol as fears about supply mounted. Mr Kadono says METI staff are working around the clock, snatching their brief sleep in the darkened office, where lights are off to save energy.

Yet Mr Kadono acknowledges that because of increased refining elsewhere in Japan, the overall supply of fuel was never short. That makes the fuel queues all the more bewildering. Part of the problem is a law requiring oil companies to keep 70 days' worth of fuel in reserve. It took ten days to relax this to 45 days. The ministry may use only "administrative guidance" to encourage companies to release fuel; it cannot order them to do so. It has also been slow in dispatching tanker lorries along the empty highways north.

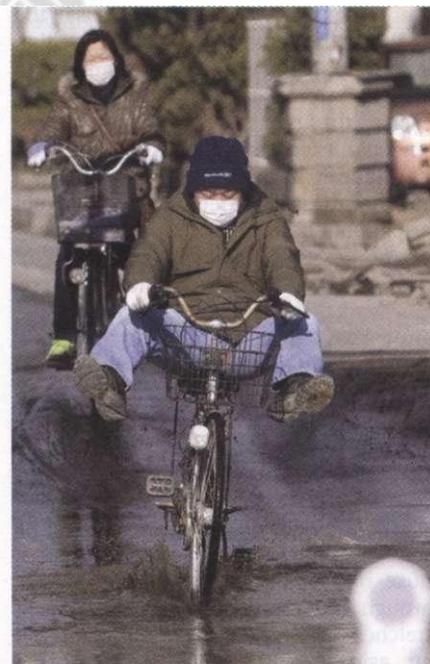
Mr Matsuda, the senator, says the government should, early on in the crisis, have declared a state of emergency to override the petty regulations that snarl up disaster relief. But he says that even now few politicians are aware of the extent of the shortages along the coast. That may be partly because they are underreported in a national media fixated on what seemed to matter most in Tokyo. When METI briefed parliamentarians this week to reassure them the fuel shortage was being tackled, everyone "nodded mutely, Mr Matsuda says.

He argues that the "vertically structured" nature of governance in Japan makes strong leadership all the more important. Naoto Kan, the prime minister, has not provided this, though that is not entirely his fault. The government has had more disasters on its hands in two weeks than most governments face in their lifetime. From the start, most of the focus has been on controlling the radiation spewing out of the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear-power plant, 240km north of Tokyo. Leaks continued even after TEPCO, its owner, restored power to all six stricken reactors.



Mr Kan has also sought to prevent hysteria, a threat which re-emerged on March 23rd when levels of radioactive iodine believed harmful to babies were found in Tokyo's water system (though Japan's standards are unusually strict). Bottled water is now in short supply in Tokyo shops; This has added to fears about the safety of milk, vegetables and seafood found near the reactor. After government assurances, the Japanese, although obsessed with food safety, have remained calm: at lunchtime in Tokyo workers still tuck into vegetable and shrimp tempura. But on March 23rd America became the first foreign country to block imports of produce from the radiation zone. Not for the first time, America seems to be less trusting of assurances about safety than are the Japanese. Other countries have followed suit.

Throughout the nuclear saga, a dose of old-fashioned heroism has lifted the national mood. Firemen and TEPCO workers



It's no glide from here

have volunteered to brave repeated amounts of high radiation to keep water jets playing on overheating fuel rods, and to fix supplies of electricity. After days of begging for help, many citizens stranded in evacuation shelters near the Fukushima plant were bused to Tokyo for refuge. Given the persistence of radiation, albeit only at low levels so far, some worry that they will never return home.

Keeping up with the crisis

For the government, the task is to get ahead of the crisis. So far events have left it always looking a day or two behind. What's more, it has been unable to pull together a crisis team, involving experts from business and elsewhere, that might give a sense of leadership on every front of the disaster. Part of the problem is crass intransigence by the opposition. Mr Kan's overtures to opposition politicians for a cabinet of national unity have so far been rejected. Meanwhile, the opposition is still scoring points over next year's proposed budget. Legislation to finance the budget is meeting obstruction, even though more funds will be needed for disaster relief.

Even if the authorities were to take more assured control of the crisis, the short-term problems remain immense. The fuel shortage and rolling power cuts have already crippled industrial production. Morgan Stanley, a bank, reckons GDP could fall at least an annualised 6% from April to June. The car industry, which accounts for a tenth of industrial output, has stalled, partly because the disaster knocked out plants making vital micro-controllers. Toyota, which pioneered the process of running just-in-time inventory systems, idled all its domestic plants for lack of parts or resins.

The staggered power cuts are also proving ill-conceived. Interrupting power even for a few hours sometimes forces factories to shut all day, says the boss of a large chemical firm. After a shutdown it can take hours to recalibrate machinery.

For all that, quiet confidence is growing among businessmen that Japan will rebuild itself. UBS, a bank, predicts that finding energy-saving technologies to counter the potential loss of nuclear power will imbue Japan with a new creative mission.

And in Kesennuma, too, a diamond-edged business spirit is starting to take hold again. An entrepreneurial young grocer who had lost his home and shop had set up a market stall out of a pick-up truck. He was doing a brisk trade selling fruit to people who had been without fresh food for more than a week. The smile on his face looked familiar. It was Mr Mogi, the man who just a few hours earlier had rescued his precious computer, with all his customer records on it, from his flattened house. "Gambarimasu" he said: We'll try our best.