

# JAPAN: RESPONDING CREATIVELY TO CRISIS

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**TOKYO, Jul 4 2011 (IPS)** - The human spirit has a truly remarkable capacity -the ability to generate hope from the most devastating of crises. This ability to create value can be seen in the response to the earthquake that struck Japan on March 11.

Following the earthquake and tsunami, there has been a tremendous response from people throughout the world in the form of aid and relief, as well as countless outpourings of support, both material and psychological. The Japanese people will never forget this heartfelt response: as we embark on the long path to recovery, it will be with a consciousness of our debt of gratitude to the boundless goodwill of people from all around the world.

The British historian Arnold J. Toynbee is known for his theory of challenge and response. "Civilisations," he wrote, "come to birth and proceed to grow by successfully responding to successive challenges." This struggle to face new challenges is surely certain to persist so long as human history continues.

Confronted by a disaster of unimaginable scale, the Japanese people are searching for ways to get back on their feet and discover appropriate responses to a series of interlinked problems. Indeed, the greater these challenges, the greater the potential to find creative responses that will inspire people everywhere and contribute to the sum of human wisdom.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of such responses is rooted in the strength of human community.

Many of the stories of near-miraculous survival following the earthquake and the tsunami were made possible only through neighbours supporting one another. Furthermore, during the days and weeks after the disaster when the essential lifelines of communications, water, electricity, and gas were disrupted, it was the mutual support of local communities and neighbourhood associations that helped meet the needs and provide a vital human connection for survivors.

I personally know of many individuals who have nobly dedicated themselves to helping others and working toward the recovery of their communities, freely sharing what meagre resources they had and pouring their energy into assisting others, often despite having lost their own loved ones, homes, and livelihoods. One can only be moved to admiration by the sparkling core of humanity that shines through at such times of crisis.

We saw countless such acts of selfless cooperation at our Soka Gakkai community centres in the affected regions, which we opened as evacuation centres immediately after the earthquake.

In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, when the transportation network linking the affected area with Tokyo was severely disrupted, volunteers in Niigata on Japan's northwestern coast were able to deliver relief supplies using circuitous alternative routes. These volunteers hail from areas that had themselves experienced major earthquakes in 2004 and 2007, and thus were painfully aware of the needs of the survivors. They worked full-out preparing essential supplies such as drinking water, rice balls and other emergency food supplies, generators, fuel, and portable toilets, and were able to deliver them in the shortest possible time. I've been told that these volunteers were motivated by a sense of gratitude for the assistance they had received at the time of the Niigata earthquakes: "So many people helped us then, this time it was our turn to do what we can."

The suffering caused by a major earthquake can be truly staggering. But wherever such tragedies have struck in recent years -the Sumatra earthquake and Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, the Sichuan earthquake in China in 2008, the Haiti earthquake of 2010- a sense of human solidarity has emerged, a community of brave and dedicated citizens determined to help each other. Such actions, and the spirit behind them, are truly awe-inspiring. I know I am not alone in seeing in this a genuine goodness that flows from the very heart of our humanity.

Obviously relief operations mounted by the authorities must be central to rescue and reconstruction activities. But at the same time, it is well documented that it is often the cooperative actions of local communities that can deliver a critical lifeline to people who have been worst impacted and remain vulnerable.

As reconstruction efforts continue, the spiritual aspect of care and support becomes ever more crucial, and it is the human network of individuals interacting, treasuring, and encouraging each other every day at the grassroots level that plays the key role in this. In that sense, genuine solidarity among people can provide a foundation for the kind of human security that cannot be shattered even by the direst of calamities.

Our response to the disaster must be to create enduring value out of tragedy. This means coming to a deeper understanding of the true nature of human happiness. This in turn will reshape the way humankind envisions the future in all its aspects, including the critical area of energy policy.

Just as the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in 1986 forced a rethinking of many issues, the accidents at the Fukushima nuclear power plant are having a profound impact on people's views and attitudes the world over.

Although the concrete options available to each country will vary, there can be no doubt that a new current in human history is being born. This is seen in the aggressive promotion of renewable energy sources, the development of energy-efficient technologies and the more careful management of resources generally.

Reaching the goal of a sustainable society will require that we embrace a way of looking at the world -a system of values- that can rein in the runaway excesses of human greed, wisely redirecting these impulses toward higher purposes.

I hope that we will develop a response to the present disaster that pulls together humanity's wisdom as we seek the recovery of our livelihoods, the recovery of our society, the recovery of our civilisation, and underpinning all of these, a robust recovery of the human heart. (END/COPYRIGHT IPS)