

Natural Disaster and Nuclear Crisis in Japan

Response and recovery after Japan's 3/11

Edited by Jeff Kingston

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NATURAL DISASTER AND NUCLEAR CRISIS IN JAPAN

The March 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan plunged the country into a state of crisis. As the nation struggled to recover from a record-breaking magnitude 9 earthquake and a tsunami that was as high as 38 meters in some places, news trickled out that the Fukushima nuclear power plant had experienced meltdowns in three reactors. These tragic catastrophes claimed some 20,000 lives, initially displacing some 500,000 people and overwhelming Japan's formidable disaster preparedness.

This book brings together the analysis and insights of a group of distinguished experts on Japan to examine what happened, how various institutions and actors responded, and what lessons can be drawn from Japan's disaster. The contributors, many of whom experienced the disaster first hand, assess the wide-ranging repercussions of this catastrophe and how it is influencing Japanese politics, civil society, energy policy, the economy, and urban planning.

This book is essential reading for anyone seeking an understanding of the events of March 2011 in Japan and the wider consequences for the future of the country and the rest of the world.

Jeff Kingston is Professor of History and Director of Asian Studies at Temple University, Japan. He is the author of *Japan's Quiet Transformation* (2004) and *Contemporary Japan* (2011).

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SERIES EDITORS' PREFACE

Japan's triple disaster of March 11, 2011 (now known widely as '3/11') is reminiscent of the myth of Achilles. According to a late version of the story, the mother of Achilles, seeking to make him invulnerable, dipped the child Achilles into the River Styx, holding him by his heel. But this failed to save him when, as an adult warrior, he was wounded in his unprotected heel.

Japan is home to some 20 per cent of the earthquakes that occur on the planet, so that government authorities had come to enforce extremely stringent building regulations designed to minimise damage and casualties from shaking of their unstable land. Officials were well aware that the Great Kantō earthquake that destroyed much of Tokyo and Yokohama in 1923 cost over 100,000 lives. If the even stronger quake (an extraordinary 9 on the Richter scale) that occurred on 3/11 had hit an inland area, no doubt the government would have derived satisfaction from the success of its policies, since only a few hundred people died as a result of the quake alone. But a major fracture of a tectonic plate some 150 km off the north-eastern coast of Japan's main island of Honshū caused a tsunami that reached a maximum height of 38 m at places along the coast, overwhelming local communities and raising the death toll to more than 20,000. The lesson of a similar occurrence in the 1890s had apparently not been learned. Moreover, it caused the cooling system to fail at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear reactors, bringing about meltdown and radiation leakage. The Japanese Achilles was unprotected, not in one heel, but in two.

The present multi-authored volume seeks to assess the extent and nature of the disaster, the multiple crises that it caused, the performance of central and local governments and their agencies, the private sector and civil society – not forgetting US forces stationed in Japan – in working for recovery from the disaster. Much of the writing in this book has great immediacy, given that several of the authors work and live in Japan, and their accounts are closely engaged with the events.

This imparts to their sharply analytical approaches an unusually compelling character.

The timing of 3/11 is particularly important and is reflected in much of the analysis. In government and politics the disaster occurred at a time when the political system was being criticised for inadequate leadership and sclerotic procedures – this despite the fact that a rare change of government had taken place in 2009. As a case study of political disaster-response, it showed that the system was hard put to rise above petty politics and unite behind a clear strategy of recovery. Kan Naoto, Prime Minister for the first six months after the disaster, had good intentions but was frustrated at every turn by rivals within his own party, a recalcitrant opposition party determined to get rid of him, and hostile mass media.

Several authors throw a critical light on the so-called ‘nuclear village,’ and its cosy relations with past governments, leading to complacency about the security of nuclear reactors in an earthquake-prone zone. The Fukushima crisis has turned public opinion strongly against nuclear energy, but the future implications are far from clear. As we write this preface, 42 of Japan’s 54 nuclear power plants are currently either off-line for regular maintenance or shut down for stress-testing. It is far from clear as to what will happen with them next. Should Japan phase out nuclear energy as a key part of its energy mix and go for renewable sources, or simply reinforce safety regulations? This book examines both possibilities.

Another area covered extensively here is that of volunteering and the development of civil society. Impressive efforts were made by an army of external volunteers in the stricken communities, as well as by local authorities and local people themselves. The implications of this for the potential decentralisation of politics are crucial, as several authors point out. But the magnitude of the problem still remaining is shown by the numbers still living in temporary accommodation, the difficulty of reviving ravaged communities on low-lying coastal land, many of whose surviving inhabitants are elderly, in a region of Japan that is outside the economic mainstream. One substantial area is rendered uninhabitable for the long term by the radiation leakages.

The present volume is a timely and indispensable guide to understanding Japan’s triple disaster and its aftermath, as well as the prospects for the future.

Arthur Stockwin
Roger Goodman