Tohoku Diary
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There are towns along the Pacific coast in Tohoku, the region northeast of Tokyo, with names like Ofunato and Rikuzen Takada in Iwate prefecture, and Minami Sanriku, Kesennuma, and Watari in Miyagi prefecture that until March 11th of this year meant little more to most Japanese than the names of towns along the Maine coast mean to most Americans. Many people knew little more about these towns than that they were places from where Japanese got a lot of their fish, and that they have a harsh winter climate and hard working people of few words.

The 9.0 magnitude earthquake and the tsunami that struck Tohoku on that day in March changed all that. Now the names of these towns, towns that I visited over several days at the beginning of May, and others on the northeast coast evoke images of miles upon miles of devastation where houses, ports, fishing boats, merchant shops and small factories, rice fields and hot houses for vegetables and strawberries have disappeared, turning the landscape into an endless vista of debris punctuated by the occasional presence of a boat or car perched on the roof of some concrete structure that did not collapse under the incredible force of the tsunami. The tsunami left more than 25,000 people dead or missing. It damaged or destroyed 125,000 buildings, and spread an estimated 27 million tons of debris over a wide expanse of the northeast Pacific coast. In Miyagi prefecture alone the debris tonnage is the equivalent of 23 years of the prefecture's garbage.

Few lives were lost as a result of the earthquake itself. Japan has gone to extraordinary lengths to adopt strict building codes, early warning systems, earthquake evacuation drills, and other measures to protect people and property in the event of a major earthquake.

Japan's bullet train system has a network of 97 earthquake detectors. About fifteen seconds before the 3.11 quake hit the tracks, automatic brakes stopped all 27 bullet trains then running, including those on the tracks of JR East, the company that operates the bullet train line from Tokyo north through Sendai to Aomori, 444 miles away, There was extensive damage done at many places along the route to stations, bridges, and tunnels but no lives were lost.

Earthquake damage to the train station at Sendai, Miyagi prefecture's capital, had been repaired by the time I got there on May 4th, a few days after bullet train service resumed along the entire Tokyo-Aomori route. Neither at the train station nor anywhere else in the city center was there evidence that Sendai had been violently shaken by the strongest earthquake in its history.

In Tokyo high-rise buildings swayed, and did so for so many minutes that it made some people feel as though they were sea sick, but none collapsed. Falling objects killed or injured several people but overall damage was minimal. In the north the earthquake knocked out electricity, gas, and water lines, but power was restored relatively quickly in areas that were beyond the reach of the tsunami, and deaths and injuries were few.

I stayed one night at an old inn in Ichinoseki in Iwate prefecture, one of the inland cities hard hit by the earthquake. There were cracks in the walls of the inn but there was electricity and gas and running water. The owner told me that her elderly mother, who was standing at the entrance looking confused and anxious, became so frightened by the intensity of the earthquake that she completely lost her hearing. The owner said that she was putting off fixing the cracks and repairing other damage that the earthquake had caused because she assumed that at some point there will be a much more powerful aftershock than any they had experienced so far. The only question was when it would come. If the inn survived that quake, she would make repairs then. Lying on my futon on the second floor, I fell asleep hoping that we would not find out the answer about the inn's survival that night. We didn't. If there had not been the tsunami, the lead story about March 11th would have been about the remarkably successful earthquake disaster prevention measures Japan has adopted.

After arriving in Sendai and checking into the hotel, I headed out to the Sendai airport. Driving toward the ocean from the city center, everything looked normal for the first ten kilometers or so. Then the scenery suddenly turned bizarre: a smashed car sitting in the middle of a rice field, wood, metal and other debris scattered here and there. The closer I got to the ocean the more destruction I saw: a two-story building for example whose walls were still intact but without any windows left on either the first or second floor. The tsunami had blown them out, washing away most of the things that had been inside and drowning people who were living there. I could see large characters painted at the top of what had been the building's entrance. They indicated that this had been a community old age home.

There was an incredible number of cars tossed about helter-skelter throughout the area along the coast, many so crushed and mangled that it looked as though they had been involved in head-on collisions. One car was perpendicular with the front half of its hood buried in the ground, looking as though someone had tried to plant it. Others were upside down and one looked as though it was trying to climb a tree. The Self Defense Forces have been collecting and sorting the debris and piling it up – wood here, scrap metal there - for eventual disposal. Every so often along the side of a road there would be a stack of ruined automobiles piled on top of each other and taking up the equivalent of half a New York city block. Since automobiles are virtually the sole mode of transportation for people who live in this coastal part of Sendai, it is not unusual for a household to have several cars for family members to commute to work. Never have I seen so many ruined automobiles.

The area around the airport, the large Sendai shipping port, the Wakabayashi ward, which suffered the most death and destruction in Sendai, and everything in between was a scene of utter devastation. It is going to take imagination, money, bold planning, and strong political leadership to rebuild this area. The rice fields have been inundated with salt water and the land in many places has sunk 70-80 centimeters. Restoring this land to agricultural use will be difficult and expensive. The port will be restored and airport repairs will be completed, but in the absence of some development scheme that at the present time seems to be nowhere in sight, the population of this corner of Sendai and

even more so in the affected towns along the coast undoubtedly will decline, leaving behind mostly elderly people who cannot or do not want to leave the only place they have ever known, even if there is nothing there.

The tsunami rolled across the Sendai airport, washing mud and debris onto the runways and doing extensive damage to the terminal building. With the bullet train system down, the airport not functioning, boats unable to enter the Sendai port, and roadways cracked and covered with debris, it was a monumental task to get relief supplies and rescue workers into the region.

In the days immediately following the earthquake, the US military in Japan launched "Operation Tomodachi" (tomodachi meaning friend), ferrying supplies by helicopter from the aircraft carrier Ronald Reagan, which had changed course to go to Japanese waters to assist the humanitarian effort. A team of Air Force special forces flew from Okinawa to a Japanese self defense force airbase near Sendai and then travelled to the airport in Humvees they had brought in with them. Within a few hours the team had enough of one of the runways cleared for C-130s to land with emergency supplies. When I got to the airport a month and a half later, the runways were open for limited domestic civilian traffic but the passenger terminal building had been so badly damaged that there was only one small area being used for ticketing and passenger check in.

The Japanese press and television, unlike the US media which did not give much attention to Operation Tomadachi, gave prominent coverage to the activities of the American troops. The favorable publicity no doubt reinforced Japanese public support for alliance with the United States, which was strong to begin with.

Whether that will change anything about issues that the US military cares about is another matter. Operation Tomodachi is not going to make it any easier to solve the problem of what to do with the Marine Corp's Futenma air station in Okinawa. Building a new base at Henoko off Okinawa's northeast coast does not appear to be a viable option. Staying put at Futenma is an option but hardly a desirable one. This base sits smack in the middle of Ginowan city where the eardrum breaking noise of fighter jets and other planes taking off and landing and the ever-present danger of a major accident are what led the US and Japanese governments to decide more than a decade ago to close it down.

In the aftermath of the earthquake, several US Senators – Democrats Carl Levin and Jim Webb and Republican John McCain – publicly called on President Obama to abandon the Henoko option, saying that it was unrealistic to expect Japan to provide the funding needed to build the base at Henoko when it faced a huge reconstruction bill in Tohoku. They proposed closing the Futenma base and moving the Marines that are stationed there to the Kadena air force base, the largest US military base in Okinawa.

Even if the US air force were to agree to joint use with the Marines and the Obama Administration were to abandon its commitment to the Henoko relocation, the Japanese government would still face the formidable task of convincing the Okinawa government to go along. Okinawans want less of a US military presence on their island, where most

US bases in Japan are located. As for Japanese living on Japan's main islands, appreciation of the US military effort in Tohoku is heartfelt but it has not changed their Not In My Backyard attitude toward the disposition of US military bases in their country.

US military personnel, in addition to their work in opening the airport and ferrying in supplies, worked with the SDF in the offshore search for victims. They also cleared the debris at one of the many damaged train stations. I met with a US Army Major stationed in Sendai who serves as liaison between US forces Japan, which now have left the area and returned to their bases elsewhere in Japan, and the Self Defense Forces' Northeast army. Major Brooke took me to the Nobiru train station to show me the work the US military did in cleaning up debris from the platform and the adjacent tracks. Visiting this site as well as seeing the damage done to railway tracks, stations, bridges and trains throughout the disaster area left me dubious that this effort was of much more than symbolic value. The debris at Nobiru station was gone but the tracks were bent and half buried in sand and mud, a train that had been at the station looked beyond repair, and you could not see the tracks for more than a few hundred yards beyond the station platform in either direction because of all the detritus that has yet to be cleared away.

It is doubtful that restoring the Nobiru station and the railroad bridges and tunnels along the battered coast makes much sense. Many of the people whose homes were swallowed up by the tsunami are going to relocate to higher ground away from the current rail lines. The destruction offers an opportunity to build a new railway system that could take advantage of the latest technology and be designed more rationally than the one that now is in ruins. But to do that would require the kind of quick and decisive action by the government that is notable right now for its absence.

American participation in efforts to help people in Tohoku has not been limited to the military. There are American and other foreign volunteers working with Japanese and international NGO's throughout the disaster zone. One of these is an international disaster relief organization called All Hands that is active in Ofunato city in Iwate prefecture. What the American volunteers working with All Hands are doing is a reminder that the US-Japan relationship is far more than a military alliance.

The great majority of Americans working in Tohoku with All Hands and with other NGOs are people who are living in Japan. A typical case is that of a businessman who has been in Kanazawa for more than fifteen years who took time off from work to volunteer with All Hands, saying that after all Japan has done for him he could not stay away and do nothing.

Another American there turned out to be my student from twenty years ago. (Teach long enough and former students show up in all sorts of unexpected places). Having gone from Columbia to a successful career as an investment banker, he became prosperous and was enjoying retired life in Tokyo until the earthquake struck. Able to set his schedule as he likes, he decided to do volunteer work with All Hands. This subsequently became his new calling. He heads the All Hands operation in Tohoku, and when he is not shoveling mud and debris along with other volunteers he gives financial advice to local government

leaders and businessmen and fishermen trying to get their businesses up and running again.

An American woman who runs a consulting company in Boston was there working with the volunteers as a translator. Born in Tokyo and having lived there through high school, she said that for her Japan is home. She felt that she had to come to do something to help.

When I caught up with the All Hands volunteers, they were working on a house that had been badly damaged by the tsunami but was repairable. Mrs. Chiba, the owner of the house, was watching them work when I got there. She is staying in an evacuation center with her husband, who is confined to a wheelchair, and her son. She said that a couple of nights earlier she had slept soundly through the night for the first time in the nearly two months that she has been at the evacuation center. "I went to bed thinking that in the morning those nice volunteers would be back at my house," she said. "I felt so relieved."

There are countless uplifting stories about the foreign volunteers and the reception they have found, but there also have been problems with government bureaucrats telling volunteer organizations that their help wasn't needed or that there were no accommodations for them. It would be a mistake simply to chalk this up to xenophobia or to conclude that it is typical of the government's response. Rather, these frazzled functionaries seem incapable of doing anything for which there is no precedent, to think "outside the box," and they find dealing with NGO's, Japanese or foreign, to be more trouble than it is worth.

All Hands got lucky in Ofunato. The mayor, who had worked for the Shimizu Corporation before deciding to run for mayor of his hometown, had spent time at the architecture school at Harvard. He met with the representative of All Hands, discussed the situation with him in English, and not only welcomed the volunteers to his city but found a place for them to live. Although there have been glitches, on the whole the Japanese government and local communities have welcomed foreign volunteers and have been grateful for their help.

There has been an outpouring of sympathy for Tohoku's victims from across Japan. Innumerable ad hoc groups have emerged to collect donations of money and of clothing and other needed items. Many Japanese have been volunteering. Estimates of the number of volunteers who have gone to Tohoku during the first three months range from half to three-quarters of a million people. The number is impressive especially when you consider how much time it takes to reach the devastated areas from Tokyo and the lack of adequate accommodations.

It is difficult to take unscheduled vacation time in the typical Japanese company, especially on short notice, but many companies are making special arrangements to make it easier for their employees to take time off to do volunteer work. The Mitsubishi Corporation, for example, has established an employee volunteer program whereby employees go to Tohoku in groups of ten for three nights and four days. They receive

their regular salaries during this time. This program is scheduled to run for one year initially.

Relief activities in Tohoku, whether removing debris, providing psychological counseling, or rebuilding damaged facilities, are hampered by the lack of a sufficient infrastructure and of people with the management skills needed to coordinate these kinds of activities. Finding housing for volunteers for example and putting them in touch with reliable organizations requires having people on the ground tasked with these responsibilities. Tohoku's recovery is a long-term challenge that will require continued assistance of various kinds. Along with all the other problems they face, prefectural authorities and the national government need to build an infrastructure to facilitate and coordinate the help that so many individuals and organizations would like to offer.

I met many people and heard many terribly sad and terrifying stories. I spent a couple of hours with Mayor Sato of Minami Sanriku town. He was in the town office with more than thirty town officials when the earthquake struck. They all ran up to the roof, anticipating that a tsunami would come. What they could not know was that this tsunami would be so powerful – it was measured at one location at 128 feet and it wrought its destruction as far as 6 miles inland– that it would be higher than the town hall. Sato and a few others were thrown by the wave toward one end of the roof where he was able to grab onto a steel pole. He managed to hold on as the tsunami washed over him. Most of the others were pushed to the other side where there was only a flimsy metal fence. The fence broke under the force of the water and they were swept away to their death. Only ten people working in the town office including the mayor survived.

Photographs and television footage do not do justice to the incredible scale of the devastation that struck Minami Sanriku town. There is almost nothing left of the homes and businesses that were there. The fish market, the seafood processing plants and canneries along the wharves, and almost all the boats that had anchored in its harbors were badly damaged or destroyed. (According to the Miyagi prefectural government, about 90 percent of the 13,400 fishing boats in the prefecture were damaged or destroyed. Most of the boats that survived were those that fishermen sailed out into the open ocean as soon as the earthquake struck to ride out the tsunami).

When I visited evacuation centers in Minami Sanriku and other towns the first thing that struck me, and that is immediately apparent to anyone who has seen television footage of the evacuation centers, is how orderly they are. This is Japan after all and people are incredibly – that is incredibly to someone who is not Japanese – neat and polite. Of course shoes are taken off before entering the room, there are special slippers to wear at the bathrooms, which are immaculate, there is no one playing loud music that might disturb someone else and people keep their voices down so as not to bother their neighbors. Their neighbors in this case are people living on the other side of a cardboard partition. Whatever meager belongings they have are arranged neatly along the outer perimeter of the small space that these people have had to live in for the past months, ever since their homes and possessions and in all too many cases their loved ones perished.

At the end of June there were still just under 90,000 people living in evacuation centers. The government has promised that by August it will complete the building of temporary housing where people can stay for up to two years while they make arrangements for their permanent relocation. But moving homeless and elderly people – an estimated thirty percent or more of the population in the tsunami affected areas is over 65 years old – into temporary housing is not a simple matter.

The government has been building housing blocks on public land outside the tsunami zone, mostly on the soccer fields and baseball diamonds of local elementary and middle schools and on land adjacent to community and town-run cultural centers. But there is not enough of this kind of land available for the more than 72,000 temporary housing units the government plans to construct in Iwate, Miyagi and Fukushima prefectures. In many of the towns along the coast, higher elevation land is too steep to build on or it is privately owned. The government has to negotiate lease arrangements with private landowners and it also has to level some mountainous land, processes that take both time and money.

The effort to build temporary housing as quickly as possible and move people out of the evacuation centers has created problems of its own. The government has adopted a lottery system to determine who should be eligible to move into these housing units as they become available. While that may seem fair, it has created considerable anxiety among people who have lived their entire lives in the hamlets that are the basic units of rural Japanese society.

One elderly lady drove the point home to me. She does not want to leave the evacuation center, she said, if it means moving to temporary housing somewhere where she is separated from her friends in the village where she has lived all her life. She would prefer to stay there until all the people in her village could be resettled together. She is afraid of the loneliness and worries about becoming entirely dependent on her son to drive to wherever she might be relocated to take her to her doctor. She was not alone in this view: I heard the same lament from others as well.

A misguided desire to be equitable has collided with the norm of community solidarity that remains so pervasive in isolated, poor areas in rural Japan. (In terms of per capita GDP, Miyagi ranks number 32 of Japan's 47 prefectures and Iwate number 39). Even more, government policy seems oblivious to the special problems faced by the elderly. I was told of a landowner in Ofunato who donated hilltop land he owns to be used for temporary housing but in doing so insisted that the agreement with the city stipulate that all the residents of the local hamlet would be offered the opportunity to move there before housing would be made available for occupancy by others. Resettling these displaced people in a manner that not only gives them a roof over their heads but that sustains community ties and mitigates the isolation of elderly people living on their own requires a much more fine-tuned approach than the one-size-fits-all policy approach favored by government bureaucrats.

Even in the urban setting of Kobe, there were many cases of "death in isolation" (*kodokushi)* of elderly people living alone in temporary housing after the 1995 Hanshin Awaji earthquake. Not only did they die alone; in many cases their bodies were not

discovered for several days or weeks after their death. Elderly people in the evacuation centers in Tohoku have good reason to be frightened at the prospect of living separated from friends and relatives. Most of the victims of the earthquake and tsunami have nothing left except each other. The government's resettlement program threatens to take even that away from many of them as well.

Many observers have noted the bravery, stoicism, and resilience of the victims of the Tohoku people. They have a dignity about them, an instinctive readiness to band together to help each other, a courage and an inner strength that has impressed the entire world but that perhaps has impressed no one more than the Japanese themselves. People who thought that cherished core traditional Japanese values had weakened or disappeared stared at their television screens transfixed as they watched people forming long lines to wait patiently for water and for a single rice ball for dinner, and as tens of thousands of people who had crammed into evacuation centers got themselves organized, chose leaders, and formed groups to perform the various tasks needed to make their refuge as civilized and comfortable a place to live as possible. The pictures and stories coming out of Tohoku were heartbreaking and at the same time inspiring. They have given Japanese a renewed sense of pride. That could be a source of energy if only Japan had leaders who had a sense about how to mobilize and channel it.

It is important not to exaggerate and idealize the stoic, patient, resilient Tohoku victim. You do not have to spend much time talking with people in the evacuation centers before you are overwhelmed by how frightened they are and how hopeless they feel. They are bitterly disappointed in their government's inadequate response to their predicament, and they are desperate about their future. These are brave people who have nothing and have no idea what the future holds.

One woman told me that her only worldly possession is the cell phone she had with her when she fled the tsunami. But she smiles and says that she will be okay. Another lady, perhaps in her mid 60s and with the sweetest, softest smile told me that she shares her small space in the evacuation center with three other people. I assumed that one of them was her husband and asked her what his occupation is. "Oh, my husband," she said very gently, "he got swept away by the tsunami and died." As she spoke she strained to keep her smile on her lips but there were tears in her eyes and every muscle in her face seemed pulled taut.

I visited an evacuation center in Watari, a town about 30 kilometers south of Sendai that is famed for its strawberries, accompanied by a local town assemblyman whom I had met through a mutual friend. It was the middle of the afternoon and there were perhaps 100 people sitting around chatting quietly or napping, or just staring out into space.

The assemblymen went over to three men who were sitting together, introduced me and asked one of them to talk to me and tell me what he thought the government should be doing to deal with their situation. The man said that he did not have anything to say and turned away. I would have given up but the assemblyman persisted. Being friends from the same village, he asked the man to do him a personal favor and just answer a question or two.

I sat down on the floor next to him and tried to engage him and his companions in casual conversation. For the first few minutes all I got were short and guarded replies and a kind of when-are-you-going-to-get-out-of-here look from the three of them. But in this and other interviews I had in Tohoku, people spent the first few minutes trying to figure out who is this Japanese speaking American and deciding whether they wanted to talk to me.

It did not take long before their guard came down. Usually it was sparked by some innocent question, as happened when I asked the lady what her husband's occupation was. In this case I asked the man sitting next to me what he did for a living before the tsunami hit. He said that he was a strawberry farmer. When I then asked him whether he planned to go back to strawberry farming, the floodgates opened up. "How can I," he said, "I am 70 years old, my house is gone, the strawberry hothouses have all been destroyed, the land is full of salt water and has sunk 75 centimeters, I still have a loan on equipment I bought that is ruined. I have no income and no way to take out another loan on top of the one I already have. "

The other two men were sitting across the table from us. One of them had been sitting there stone-faced but suddenly he too became animated and chimed in to tell me that to buy a new thresher costs more than 8 million yen, or roughly $85,000. He does not have that kind of money and at his age he is not going to get a loan. So he sits there with little more to do than contemplate the dead-end predicament he finds himself in.

The third man told me that he is 43 years old and is also a strawberry farmer. His facial expressions and body language left me with the disquieting feeling that he was perhaps the most stressed and depressed person of all I had met. I tried to be encouraging and said that he was still young and physically fit and what did he think about moving to Sendai or somewhere else where there were job opportunities and getting a new start. His answer was that he has lived his whole life in the village where he was born, that he never wanted to move away and does not want to now, that growing strawberries is all he knows how to do and is the only thing that he loves to do, and that he has no idea what is going to become of him now that everything is gone.

There is no place for him to turn for well-informed advice. He can get a temporary job cleaning up debris or fill out an application at one of the "Hello work" employment centers. He might have the opportunity to talk with a psychiatrist or one of the other mental health specialists who have been going to Tohoku from around the country to offer their services. But since they stay for only a few days at most and are not familiar with local conditions, it is questionable how helpful their psychological counseling is. More than a psychiatrist, what this strawberry farmer and others like him need are government policies that give them some reason to have hope about their future.

There was a lively old lady at the Watari evacuation center who started out our conversation by saying with a chuckle that she got divorced when she was 37, raised her children by herself, made a living all these years growing strawberries, and that she would survive this tsunami disaster too. But after several minutes the bravado disappeared as she told me in a very heavy Tohoku dialect known as "zuzuben" that she

has no hope. “You have no hope?” I repeated, partly to make sure that I did not misunderstand what she had just said in her Tohoku accent. “None,” she said, “no hope or anything.” She added that she is 80 years old and strong and was planning to work until she is 100. But she was afraid that just sitting here in the evacuation center day after day with nothing to do except worry about the future was going to kill her. When I asked her what was most important to give her hope, this country woman’s answer echoed what the other elderly lady said to me about moving to temporary housing. “There are so many things, but what is most important is that all of us [from her village] can live together and bring our farmland back to life.”

I had planned to be at this evacuation center for no more than an hour but ended up staying for almost three. These brave people are neither as stoic nor as resilient as others who do not share their plight might like to believe. They try their best to be positive but cannot hide their stress and the grief that lines their faces. Nor are they as reticent and reserved as many people seem to think they are. Give them an opportunity to talk with a sympathetic listener, Japanese or foreigner, and they give eloquent expression to their fears. Their homes are destroyed, the land has sunk 70 centimeters or more so they cannot rebuild where they once lived even if they wanted to, and many of them do not want to rebuild where a tsunami might hit again. They have no jobs, their fishing boats, farm equipment and everything else is gone and in many cases they have loans on no longer existing homes and on factories and machinery that are beyond repair and little or no insurance to cover their loss. This is the daunting reality that political leaders in Tokyo need to contend with. They have fallen far too short in doing so.

There are local political leaders who have innovative ideas about how to rebuild their communities. The mayor of Minami Sanriku, the man who barely missed being swept off the roof of the town hall, would like to turn this disaster into an opportunity to reshape the fishing industry that is the heart of the economy of this town. Minami Sanriku has 23 ports, which means that there is a port in just about every inlet with just a few fishermen in many of them who eke out a meager income. Mayor Sato would like to consolidate them into two or three ports equipped with modern equipment and have the fishermen band together in a corporate structure that could buy and lease a modern fleet of boats and equipment.

The owner of a fish packing plant in Ofunato showed me the battered remains of a machine for smoking fish that he purchased the previous fall for a million dollars and other now useless machinery. He said that it would cost somewhere between 5-10 million dollars to recover from his loss. He is determined to get his business up and running again and hire back the employees whom he had to let go. He is investing what money he has and getting bank loans wherever he can but getting back into business without government assistance seems like an almost insurmountable hurdle. He and other local businessmen have been urging adoption of a program by which the government would purchase the equipment that is needed and lease it to people like him who want to restart their businesses.

The media and the political opposition have been unrelenting in their criticism of Prime Minister Kan. Less than 20 percent of the public supports the prime minister. More than 70 percent disapprove of the way he has been dealing with what Japanese call the Great

Eastern Japan Earthquake Disaster and would like to see him resign before the end of August. But the public entertains no illusions that the political situation will improve with Kan's resignation. No political leader has been able to capture the public's imagination. Support for the DPJ, LDP and other parties is in a kind of freefall.

By any comparative measure, the Kan government's response to the triple catastrophe of the earthquake and tsunami, has not been as awful as his critics make it out to be. (The response to the crisis at the nuclear power plant at Fukushima Daiichi is another story). It was far better than the way the Bush Administration dealt with the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and compares favorably to how other governments have responded to disaster situations.

But Japanese rightfully credit the people in Tohoku and not the government for being law abiding and orderly and for doing so much to take care of themselves and each other. They have not received the assistance from the government that they should have gotten. There are stories of elderly people who managed to survive the tsunami only to die in evacuation centers from hypothermia because of delays in getting blankets and dry clothing to them.

The owner of the fish packing plant in Ofunato went right to the core of the problem with the way the Kan Administration has dealt with the situation in Tohoku when he said, "I know that coming up with detailed policies takes time. I understand that. But what we need to hear from the prime minister are words that would give us some comfort and hope about the future. Words are important. I am investing my own money to try to recover my business but I am doing so not knowing whether to believe that the government will come through with policies that will support the reconstruction of this area or not. " Prime Minister Kan has not succeeded in convincing the public that he has a vision for Tohoku reconstruction and for Japan's future, and that there are things that he cares deeply about that he wants to accomplish as prime minister and on which he is ready to stake his government's survival.

The mood in Tohoku would be much less despondent if Prime Minister Kan had said something like "I know that the land on which you have lived is not safe to build on again and that your farms have been ruined by sea water. I cannot tell you at this moment exactly how we will do it but we will make it possible for you and your neighbors to relocate to higher ground, to stay together as a community, and provide assistance so that you can get the boats, machinery and other equipment that you need to get back to work. Don't give up hope. We will make Tohoku prosperous." He should have appointed a Reconstruction Minister immediately and tasked him with producing a basic reconstruction plan and to present it to him within weeks. Instead he created a reconstruction commission chaired by a political historian and president of the National Defense College and appointed several other academics to the Commission who also have little in the way of relevant expertise. The Commission's final report is not due until near the end of the calendar year.

Reliance on this Reconstruction Design Council will delay decisions. The report that finally emerges is certain to be a consensus document, and not offer the hard-hitting, bold,

and precedent breaking approach that is needed. Commissions and other consensus building approaches may have a role to play in normal times, but the situation in Tohoku is a state of emergency even if Japan does not have a law on the books that enables the government to define it as such. Neither Prime Minister Kan nor the leaders of the political opposition convey enough of the sense of urgency that the situation demands. It is of course important to resettle people from evacuation centers to temporary housing and to clean up the debris as quickly as possible. But there is just as urgent a need to adopt policies to create jobs and to give people hope about their future.

In a conversation I had with Prime Minister Kan on April 24th, I expressed skepticism about the usefulness of the Tohoku Reconstruction Design Council and asked him whether he really thought that it had an important role to play. His answer could not have been more discouraging. "Definitely," he said, "the Reconstruction Design Council will amass diverse public views and come up with a concept [for Tohoku's reconstruction]. "

This is akin to President Obama saying that the United States needs to restructure its health care system so he is appointing a committee comprised of people with diverse opinions to come up with a concept for health care reform. It was tough enough for Obama to get his health reform program through the Congress knowing what he wanted to do. It is impossible for Prime Minister Kan to come up with a meaningful reconstruction plan if he waits until a committee tells him what to think about everything from nuclear energy policy to city planning to tax policy and just about anything and everything else that might be relevant to recovering from the Great Northeast Earthquake Disaster.

It is the responsibility of the Prime Minister himself to come up with a basic concept for rebuilding Tohoku and to then seek expertise from within and outside the government to translate that concept into a concrete plan of action. What makes Kan's failure to provide leadership all the more troubling is that there is no other political leader in sight with the vision and political will to take the bold action that is required.

The opportunity to create a new Tohoku development model exists. The key is to designate Tohoku as a special economic zone and transfer power and money to the prefecture and local governments. Domestic and foreign businesses would be offered tax holidays and other incentives to invest in the Tohoku SEZ and prefectural governments would have the authority to decide whether to apply or suspend ministerial rules and regulations and whether to impose restrictions of their own, for example on rebuilding in the tsunami danger zone. The people who best understand what is needed are those who are there on the ground, not politicians and their advisers in Tokyo who fly in for a few meetings with local officials and fly right back to Tokyo again. The Reconstruction Council's proposal in its interim report to create special economic zones, in the plural, offers far less than meets the eye. Specific to particular industries and towns, it has the fingerprints of central government ministry bureaucrats all over it.

If action is not taken quickly the opportunity will be lost. Life will get back to normal for people who live outside the Tohoku region and as it does enthusiasm for radical change will decline. Supply chain problems are temporary. Special budgetary allocations

for Tohoku recovery will have a stimulative impact on the economy. Recovery from catastrophe is likely to be quick; six to eight months after the earthquake, the nation's growth rate is likely to be just about where it would have been had the disaster never occurred.

In Tohoku itself some people who lost their homes and businesses to the tsunami will decide nonetheless to try to resume life as they knew it before March 11th and rebuild on the land where their houses and businesses once stood. Once that happens the chance to move entire communities to new housing on higher ground, to spread a network of solar energy panels across land close to the shore, to have fisherman band together in a new corporate structure and to effect other radical reforms favored by thoughtful leaders at the local level will have been lost.

The exodus of young people from the region will accelerate but there will be enough people left to catch and package the fish that is the mainstay of this relatively impoverished region. Tohoku could sink back into obscurity and the rest of the country would hardly notice. An opportunity lost perhaps, but not the end of the world.

The three Tohoku prefectures of Fukushima, Miyagi, and Iwate account for about four percent of Japan's GDP and the areas directly affected by the tsunami for less than half of that. The truth is that if nothing much is done to give Tohoku a new start, Japan will not suffer appreciably as a consequence. That of course is a good reason to make a bold and radical policy shift. The downside risk is small, and if it were to succeed a Tohoku development model would become a beacon for Japan's future.

Politicians in Tokyo use words like crisis and emergency situation to describe the impact of the March 11th earthquake but it is not possible to square their rhetoric with their behavior. If they believed that they were dealing with a crisis they would shift their focus from trying in every which way to cause the Kan government to fall to looking for ways to forge policy cooperation across party lines. At least the opposition parties would be trying to persuade the public that they have a better program than what Prime Minister Kan is offering to respond to the crisis in Tohoku and to come to grips with the larger issues of fiscal and social security reform. But the LDP as well as Kan's opponents in his own Democratic Party cannot seem to be able to turn their attention away from trying to figure out how to bring down the government long enough to say anything constructive.

Prime Minister Kan seems to have little idea about how to structure a coherent policy making process – and he gets no help from bureaucrats who want to see him fail. He seems incapable of delegating responsibility and the crisis spawned by the catastrophe of March 11th deprived him of the luxury of time to figure out how to develop a sensible decision making system.

Japanese politics today is dominated by men consumed by petty politics and power struggles and who are out of touch with the views of the public. There is not a political leader on the scene with the skill to connect with the public and exercise the power of persuasion that is so essential to effective political leadership. It is not surprising that public opinion polls show widespread public disgust with both the DPJ and the LDP.

There is no short-term remedy for Japan's political woes. Japan, like the United States, has divided government. With their control of a majority of seats in the upper house, the opposition parties find the temptation to block the DPJ from passing legislation all but irresistible. The only way for the government to force the opposition to cooperate is to rally public opinion strongly to its side. That is how Prime Minister Koizumi was able to overcome intense opposition to his program from within his own party. But unfortunately for Japan Kan is no Koizumi.

Forming a grand coalition is not the answer to Japan's political predicament either. In Germany or in Britain parties are able to enter into coalition without forsaking their separate identities and core bases of support. But in Japan where social cleavages – class, region, religion, ethnicity, and so on -- that help structure the party system elsewhere are weak, a grand coalition would signify the effective end of the existence of a major opposition party and the virtual collapse of competitive party politics. That would not produce more enlightened policies; it would only threaten Japan's political democracy.

A grand coalition that is not based on a policy accord would move the power struggle out of public view into the backrooms of the coalition government. For the LDP the attraction of a grand coalition is the opportunity to get its hands on power once again. For the DPJ it is the hope that the LDP would in reality become hostage to the DPJ government.

There is considerable resistance to forging a coalition in both the LDP and the DPJ. Many in the LDP believe that the best course of action for their party is to hammer home the argument that the DPJ is incompetent and press for an early election. Many in the DPJ as well oppose forming a coalition because of the fear that they would become hostage to the LDP's policies rather than the other way around. So a grand coalition is not likely to materialize and if it were it would not be a palliative for a deeply troubled political system.

The Japanese public faces the dismal political reality that there is not likely to be a strong and effective government anytime soon and that the opportunity that the Tohoku tragedy presents to open a new and dynamic era probably will be lost. My experience in Tohoku left me inspired by the people I met, saddened beyond words by what I saw and what I heard, and dismayed by the failure of Japan's political leaders to grasp the opportunity that the Tohoku tragedy presents for bold and innovative policies to rebuild Tohoku and revitalize Japan.

I do not want to conclude this essay on an entirely pessimistic note, however. There are new developments at the local level that contrast sharply with the political gridlock in Tokyo and that are in part at least a response to the political vacuum that exists there. There has been a rise of dynamic local political leaders, an unprecedented level of business involvement in civic affairs and significant private sector initiatives to restore the Tohoku economy, and a blossoming of volunteerism and the strengthening of non-governmental organizations. Japanese citizens have not rioted or engaged in large-scale protest demonstrations but neither have they been indifferent to the political disarray in

Tokyo. For now their activism is taking place at the local level but Tokyo will not be able for long to ignore these growing pressures from below.

I returned to the disaster zone four times over two months since making the trip in early May that formed the basis for this essay. During these visits I met with seven mayors, the governor of Miyagi prefecture and other politicians. These local leaders wrestle with what is a crisis situation day in and day out. They do not enjoy the luxury to engage in the kind of political squabbling and gamesmanship that consume the energies of so many politicians in Tokyo and they can barely contain their frustration at having to spend valuable time meeting with Diet men whose visits to their towns and cities produce no tangible results.

Japan has a parliamentary system at the national level but a system of direct election of government leaders in the localities. Governors and mayors are elected directly for four-year terms. They have local assemblies to contend with but they are not beholden to their legislatures for their very existence as is the prime minister. There is great variety among them of course in terms of personality and political skill but in Tohoku and around the country there are increasing numbers of governors and mayors who are not hesitant to express their views and criticize the central government. They have their own ideas about how to rebuild their communities, administrative experience as their government's chief executive, and a realistic appreciation of what is doable.

Since they are there working on the ground, they understand what the issues are in a way that bureaucrats and politicians in Tokyo do not. Although needs vary from community to community, the central government adheres to its traditional one-size-fits-all-administrative approach. Moreover, bureaucratic ministries are as segmented as ever. With the organization of the prime minister's office under the DPJ still very much a work in progress there is little coordination among ministries that are involved in the reconstruction effort. Observing the situation in Tohoku has given me a new appreciation of the advantages of federalism, and of the disadvantages of Japan's overly centralized governmental system.

There is a tug of war going on between local leaders and the political leadership in Tokyo. Every mayor I met had the same grievance – that the government's response is too slow and too encumbered by bureaucratic red tape. Leaders of the DPJ have their own complaint – that these local politicians are quick to say that things should be left to them to handle and then turn around and blame the central government for not doing everything for them.

The Minister for Reconstruction, Matsumoto Ryu, was forced to resign just a few days after being appointed for lashing out precisely in this manner at the governor of Miyage. This was followed a few weeks later by a similar outburst on television by the chairman of the DPJ's Diet Management Committee Azumi Jun. The DPJ came into power two years ago trumpeting the importance of greater local autonomy but that has been pretty much swept aside by its irritation with local leaders, something that members of the LDP,

whose ties to the local political establishment are far deeper than the DPJ's, rarely if ever express publicly.

There is a serous coordination problem between local governments and Tokyo that is the result of the halfway decentralization reforms that Japan adopted over the past decade and a half. The goal of the comprehensive decentralization reform bills that the Diet adopted in 1999 was to give localities more autonomy vis-à-vis the central government. In the Japanese terminology this meant a shift from a system of agency-delegated functions (*kikan i'nin jimu),* essentially a system in which the central government told local officials what to do, to something that is referred to as "a cooperation among equals system" (*taitou kyouryoku).* But the latter term is pure hyperbole. The reality is that the reforms weakened central government authority over local governments without giving those governments the resources and power to act on their own, thus making coordination among national, prefectural, and local governments more complicated and cumbersome.. Local governments are now expected to do more for themselves but they have not been given expanded authority to increase revenue. Japan still has so-called "30 percent autonomy," with local governments dependent on central government disbursements for nearly two-thirds of their income.

The solution to this problem is to adopt far-reaching decentralization reforms. So far, however, the DPJ has not matched its rhetorical support for greater local autonomy with concrete proposals, and Diet members in the LDP exude little enthusiasm for reforms that would reduce their ability to use subsidies to get the support of local interest groups for their election campaigns.

The fact remains that many local political leaders are pushing back against the center, looking for ways to maximize their ability to act autonomously, and to respond to growing public demands for policies that the national government is either too slow or opposed to adopting. The most interesting and popular politicians in Japan today are not Diet members but governors and mayors. It is a new and encouraging development in Japanese politics.

It is the private sector that responded quickly and decisively to the disaster in Tohoku. Within days of the earthquake and tsunami Japanese automobile manufacturers sent upwards of 2000 engineers to Tohoku to assist companies that they depended on for parts to get them back in operation. Electronics companies responded with similar speed to get companies that had been knocked off line back in business. The severe disruption of supply chains in Tohoku has lasted for a much shorter time than many observers anticipated. They are expected to be completely resolved before the end of the year.

Humanitarian assistance by companies large and small has been of unprecedented scope, and continues months after March 11th. Several firms have set up funds in the one hundred million dollar range and many other companies have made large contributions as well. Having no faith in the ability of the bureaucracy to distribute their funds quickly and efficiently, businessmen have been channeling their funds through various non-profit

organizations or have taken their contribution directly the mayor of the town or city they decided to help. Individuals as well as companies have provided both money and supplies.

When I travelled to Tohoku at the end of July I visited with the owner of the fish packaging plant whom I met in May and who at the time, as described in this essay, was despondent about his ability to recover without government assistance. A little more than two months later the situation could hardly be more different. He was all smiles. He had secured bank loans to repair salvageable equipment and make necessary repairs and was proud to tell me that he would begin operating again at the beginning of August. What was most telling was that he did it without any government assistance. METI has a program to provide financial support to local businessmen. He has filed the necessary paperwork to receive assistance but as he told me, if he waited for the government to act he would be out of business.

Entrepreneurship, risk taking, individual initiative and community cohesiveness are what is bringing hope to people in Tohoku. There are other examples like this one of local companies getting back on their feet and of some large companies making new investments in the region. But these actions will be the exception to the rule in the absence of government policies to foster investment in the tsunami zone that would create jobs and keep young people from fleeing the area. This is not so much a matter of money as it is of creating an incentive structure that would attract private investment to the region. That is what local political, business, and community leaders are asking for. What is impressive about the situation in Tohoku four months after disaster struck is how much local communities are fending for themselves and how much support they are getting from the private sector and from volunteer groups around the country.

As of July 20, according to official government figures, 570,000 volunteers had been to Tohoku. The total number is probably over a million. What is especially impressive is that the flow of volunteers remains high months after disaster struck. There were 130,000 volunteers in the month of June and 75,000 in the first half of July.

Non-governmental organizations that had been accustomed to operating on a shoe-string and managing a small number of volunteers suddenly have found themselves inundated with cash and people. They are struggling to recruit managerial talent and strengthen their organizational infrastructure and to better coordinate among themselves and with local governments. These are the inevitable growing pains of a newly vibrant civil society.

The Tohoku story is one of resilience, community solidarity, and self-help. It is also the story of weak and divided politics and of the difficulty of fostering innovation and quick response in the face of excessive government regulations and a segmented bureaucratic system. And herein lies the story of the promise and the perils of Japan in the aftermath of the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake Disaster.