

The Tohoku Region, Moving into the Future

ABOUT nine years have passed since the Great East Japan Earthquake of March 2011, and the recovery of people's lives, infrastructure and industry in the affected areas in the Tohoku region is progressing. We spoke with Ishida Masaru, Director-General of the Reconstruction Agency of the Japanese government, about the overall state of the recovery and recovery initiatives in the affected areas.

About nine years have passed since the Great East Japan Earthquake. Tell us about the state of the recovery and about government support in Iwate, Miyagi and Fukushima Prefectures in the Tohoku region which were severely damaged.

Right after the earthquake, there were approximately 470,000 evacuees. As of April 2020, the number of evacuees was about 44,000. Reconstruction of housing for victims is progressing, with 30,000 public housing units and 18,000 houses in the residential area completed for housing to move to higher ground. Additionally, the reconstruction of infrastructure, including roads, ports, railways, agricultural facilities and seafood processing facilities in areas that were damaged by the tsunami and earthquake, has mostly been completed. Construction is currently progressing on the Reconstruction Roads, which run from north to south along the Sanriku Coast on the Pacific Ocean, and the Reconstruction Support Roads, which connect the coastal and inland areas from east to west, both networks of which support the local economies of affected areas. Approximately 70% of the total 570 km of roads have been opened, and the remaining sections are planned to open this year. Reconstruction of the affected areas is progressing steadily.

As there are a variety of problems following long-term life as evacuees in the affected areas,

as well as new lifestyles in public housing, many initiatives are being carried out, such as consultations on health and rebuilding life for affected people, support for everyday life, support for community creation, and more. At the same time, initiatives are being carried out to advance the rejuvenation of industries, including opening up new markets for seafood products, reviving tourism geared towards overseas visitors, dispelling negative reputational damage to agricultural, forestry and fishery products, and so on.

Tell us about a recent example that symbolizes the recovery of the affected areas.

One would be the Rugby World Cup match held in Kamaishi City, Iwate Prefecture, in September 2019. The match was held at the Kamaishi Unosumai Memorial Stadium, built on the site of former elementary and junior high schools that were completely destroyed by the tsunami, and this event showed the world a glimpse of an affected area where recovery is progressing.

Another was when the Takata Matsubara Tsunami Reconstruction Memorial Park partly opened in Rikuzentakata City, Iwate Prefecture, in September of the same year. Inside the park, facilities were built to pass on the memories of the damages and lessons learned from the earthquake. In December of the same year, part of the Minamisanriku Town Reconstruction Memorial Park opened in Minamisanriku Town, Miyagi Prefecture, and the entire park is set to open in autumn of this year.

Additionally, full operations resumed in March 2020 along the JR Joban Line, which was partially suspended within Fukushima Prefecture due to the Great East Japan Earthquake, and the opening of the entire line connecting Tokyo with Miyagi is an accomplishment symbolizing the recovery of

Ishida Masaru, Director-General of
the Reconstruction Agency of
the Japanese government

the affected areas.

Tell us about the state of radiation levels in Fukushima Prefecture, where the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station accident occurred, as well as the safety of agricultural, forestry and fishery products and initiatives towards recovery.

The radiation levels in major cities within Fukushima Prefecture are currently at about the same level as other major cities elsewhere in Japan and overseas. Additionally, the areas under evacuation order total just 2.4% of the entire prefecture, and currently, normal life is possible in the majority of areas.

As for food products in particular, agricultural, forestry and fishery products undergo a strict inspection before shipment, and products that exceed standard levels are not circulated into the market. The standard level of radioactive material in foods is set at 100 Bq/kg – stricter than the 1,000 Bq/kg defined by the Codex Alimentarius Commission, an international organization that establishes international standards for food safety and quality – and there have been almost no agricultural, forestry or fishery products that have exceeded this standard in recent years.

Various initiatives are being carried out in Fukushima Prefecture for industry recovery. One of those is the Fukushima Innovation Coast Framework, which aims to create a new industrial infrastructure. Focusing on the coastal regions of the prefecture, this Framework is moving forward through inviting new corporations to the prefecture, as well as advancing cutting-edge research and development related to the decommissioning of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station and in the fields of technology, robotics, energy, agriculture, medicine, aerospace and more. As part of the Framework, both the Fukushima Robot Test Field in Minamisoma City and Namie Town, which allows robotics research and demonstration experiments on unmanned aircraft and disaster response robots, and the Fukushima Hydrogen



Energy Research Field in Namie Town, which features the world's largest hydrogen production unit, opened in March of this year, respectively.

What kinds of initiatives are being carried out in the affected areas in preparation for the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics, which have been postponed until 2021?

The government defined the Olympics and Paralympics in Tokyo as the “Olympic Games for Recovery,” and this policy has not changed, irrespective of the postponement. The government takes initiatives in collaboration with the affected areas so that the Olympics and Paralympics act as a boost for recovery, and will show the world a glimpse of the affected areas which are recovering thanks to warm support from all over the world. Many local governments that were affected by the earthquake have already become “Arigato (*thank you*)” Host Towns for Supporting Reconstruction, interacting with countries and regions that have supported the affected areas. In addition to using recycled materials from the temporary housing built in the affected areas as part of the torch for the Olympic Torch Relay that will travel around the affected areas and all over Japan, victory bouquets for medal recipients will also be made mainly using flowers grown in the affected areas.

I hope that many people from overseas will come and visit the affected areas leading up to and after the Olympics and Paralympics once the novel coronavirus pandemic has ended. We will continue to better distribute information in the future on a wide variety of topics, including the charming nature, culture and food of the affected areas. ■

Interview by SAWAJI OSAMU
