

# 'ARIGATO' Host Towns Give Thanks for Support

**In the lead up to the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games, local municipalities in three prefectures affected by the Great East Japan Earthquake (Iwate, Miyagi and Fukushima Prefectures) have been interacting with people from countries and regions from which they received support and expressing their gratitude.**

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THE Host Town Initiative is an initiative through which people from around Japan interact with people from countries and regions that will participate in the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games. 'ARIGATO' Host Towns for Supporting Reconstruction are local municipalities that interact with people from countries and regions from which they received support following the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, and express gratitude (*arigato* means "thank you") while sharing their progress on recovery. We introduce the efforts of Nihonmatsu City in Fukushima Prefecture, Ishinomaki City in Miyagi Prefecture and Ofunato City in Iwate Prefecture as 'ARIGATO' Host Towns for Supporting Reconstruction.

## NIHONMATSU CITY AND THE STATE OF KUWAIT

The State of Kuwait (hereinafter Kuwait) donated 5 million barrels of crude oil (worth approximately 40 billion yen) to Japan for reconstruction immediately after the Great East Japan Earthquake, of which about 15.5 billion yen's worth was allocated to Fukushima Prefecture.<sup>1</sup>

Kuwait has won two bronze medals in Olympic shooting (at the Sydney and London Olympics), while Nihonmatsu City in Fukushima Prefecture boasts one of Japan's largest shooting ranges. To show its gratitude for Kuwait's support following the earthquake, the City applied to host Kuwaiti athletes for a pre-Games training camp in the sport of clay shooting, as well as swimming, karate, and more. The City was registered as an 'ARIGATO' Host Town for Supporting Reconstruction in October 2019.

The Tokyo Games were postponed in spring of 2020 and preparations to receive the athletes were temporarily put on hold, but since the fall of 2020, meetings have reconvened, mostly online, and it has been decided that Nihonmatsu will provide facilities such as a shooting gallery, a pool and a gymnasium within the city, and welcome Kuwaiti athletes to the city before the Games for about two weeks in July 2021, the situation surrounding COVID-19 permitting.<sup>ii</sup>

In April 2021, an online exchange event was held in which a written agreement and a memorandum<sup>iii</sup> related to the athletes' pre-Games training camp were signed. The meeting was attended by H.E. Mr. Hasan Mohammad Zaman, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the State of Kuwait to Japan; Minister for the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games Marukawa Tamayo; Nihonmatsu Mayor Miho Keiichi, and others. Children from Kawasaki Elementary School located in Nihonmatsu City offered greetings in Arabic. At the meeting, traditional *oshi-e* (raised cloth pictures) of camellia flowers were introduced, making for a congenial exchange event. Those *oshi-e* were sent along with a video message offering words of encouragement for the Kuwaiti athletes.

Without forgetting its gratitude for reconstruction support, Nihonmatsu City aims to accelerate international exchange among its citizens as an 'ARIGATO' Host Town for Supporting Reconstruction.



Participants including children from Kawasaki Elementary School in Nihonmatsu City at the April 2021 online exchange event with Kuwait  
Photo: Courtesy of Nihonmatsu City



The Tunisian swimming team attend a swimming class for children in Ishinomaki City  
Photo: Courtesy of Ishinomaki City

## ISHINOMAKI CITY AND THE REPUBLIC OF TUNISIA

Ishinomaki City in Miyagi Prefecture is registered as a Host Town for the Republic of Tunisia (hereinafter Tunisia).

Interactions between Ishinomaki and Tunisia began in 1992, when a Tunisian student with connections to the Tunisian Embassy enjoyed a one-night homestay in the city. The bonds of friendship between Ishinomaki and Tunisia have been nurtured ever since.

Immediately after the Great East Japan Earthquake in March 2011, officials of the Tunisian Embassy in Japan visited Ishinomaki and served traditional Tunisian food at shelters, made monetary donations, and gave support by distributing food, daily necessities, and other items.

Ishinomaki became Tunisia's 'ARIGATO' Host Town for Supporting Reconstruction in 2018 in appreciation for this support. Later, city officials visited Tunisia and talked with people from the local Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Tunisia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs about the initiative and a pre-Games training camp in the city.

When officials of the Tunisian Embassy and Paralympic Committee visited the city to see the venues for the pre-Games camp in July 2019, one officer of the Embassy spoke about Tunisian World Heritage Sites and traditional crafts, and planted an olive tree in the school yard of an elementary school together with the pupils. In January 2020, a group of swimmers from Tunisia visited Ishinomaki City for an approximately two-week pre-Games camp. During their stay, the athletes trained at the city's facilities and met with local elementary school students.

An official from Ishinomaki City says, "It's hard for citizens to have in-person exchange activities with Tunisian people due to COVID-19, so instead we asked people to appear on short videos to show our gratitude to Tunisia and sent them on a DVD to Tunisia. The video was also released on the city's website<sup>iv</sup>, so I hope many people will watch the video and that our bonds will be strengthened while we remember the support we received from Tunisia."

## OFUNATO CITY AND THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Ofunato City in Iwate Prefecture received much support from the United States of America (hereinafter United States) after the Great East Japan Earthquake. To express its gratitude, the city was registered as an 'ARIGATO' Host Town for Supporting Reconstruction in November 2017, with the United States as the counterpart country.

In March 2019, Ofunato City invited members of a search and rescue team from Fairfax, Virginia who had engaged in relief activities in the immediate aftermath of the Great East Japan Earthquake, to attend a memorial ceremony for the victims of the disaster. The city also expressed its gratitude to the team for their support and showed how the city had recovered, while the team met and engaged with local residents.

Since the disaster, university students from the United States have come to the city as volunteers to engage with elementary and junior high school students and familiarize them with the English language through sports and dances.



The members of the search and rescue team from Fairfax, Virginia with residents of Ofunato City  
Photo: Courtesy of Ofunato City

From 2013 to 2018 there was an exchange program for young baseball players from Ofunato and San Diego, California. And more recently, the U.S. Consulate General Sapporo organized an online picture book reading event for children of nursery schools in Ofunato, further deepening connections.

An official from the city says, "Through such interaction as a Host Town, we can show our gratitude to the people of the United States for their support at the time of the disaster. We also hope these activities help to promote understanding of different cultures and the advancement of international education in the city."<sup>v</sup>

i The crude oil was sold through the Japanese Red Cross Society and the money was used as aid. Part of Fukushima Prefecture's aid money was used to support disaster-affected small and medium-sized businesses, to support students at satellite schools, and for projects like the publishing of an informational magazine for people who evacuated to areas outside the prefecture.

ii Current information as of June 18, 2021

iii [https://www.city.nihonmatsu.lg.jp/data/doc/1620344125\\_doc\\_84\\_0.pdf](https://www.city.nihonmatsu.lg.jp/data/doc/1620344125_doc_84_0.pdf)

iv [https://www.city.nihonmatsu.lg.jp/data/doc/1620344134\\_doc\\_84\\_0.pdf](https://www.city.nihonmatsu.lg.jp/data/doc/1620344134_doc_84_0.pdf)

v <https://www.city.ishinomaki.lg.jp/cont/10053700/olympics/tunisia/tyunizia.html>