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Spotlight on Tatsumasa Yoshino (Rengo-Iwate – Japan)

“The world started to shake all around me and I ran for my life”

Trade Union Work When Disaster Strikes

Brussels, 4 October 2011 (ITUC OnLine): The Japanese Trade Union Confederation Rengo has been one of the major organisations involved in the relief work after the big tsunami that hit the eastern part of Honshu in March this year. Tatsumasa Yoshino is the General Secretary of a sub-regional Rengo office in the Iwate prefecture, one of the areas the hardest hit by the disaster.

The Great East Japan Earthquake, which took place on March 11, had a magnitude of 9.0 with the epicenter in the sea, about 70 km from the coast. It was so powerful that it moved the whole island Honshu twenty centimeters to the east and shifted the Earth on its axis by estimates of between 10 cm and 25 cm. There were approximately 20,000 victims of the disasters, about 15,000 found dead and another 5,000 still missing.

Tell us about what happened that day, March 11, when the earthquake happened, and was then followed by a major tsunami.

It was 14.46 on March 11 this year. I was on top of a fork-lift in the plywood factory where I work. Then the world started to shake all around me. I realised there was an earthquake. And then came the tsunami warning.

I wanted to take my car and drive away, but all the workers in the industry area seemed to have gotten the same idea. There was a huge traffic jam. So I started to run instead. Just in front of me a car driver panicked and started driving on the pavement, just running over a lot of people walking there.

Another car hit a bike, and the bike stuck to the front of the car, but the driver kept driving off with the bike attached. I just kept on running.

I started running uphill towards a hospital. Just when I thought I was safe, I looked back and I saw houses and cars floating by, so I kept running. Finally I reached safety, and I thought my lungs were about to burst.

What did you see from the top of the hill when you finally reached safety?

I watched out over the factory where I work and saw it was surrounded by water, and a gate floating on top of the factory. I saw a car and a lady inside. I tried to break the window and to open the door, but I couldn't help. The water had shortcut the electricity, and the glass in the doors were safety glass. I saw maybe 30 cars just like that.

I then looked at the bay area and saw a rooftop with 20 people. Things in the water started hitting the people, and they all floated away. I am still having nightmares about the things I saw during the tsunami.

What has been the role of Rengo following the disaster?

Rengo has more than six million members. We started our first voluntary work 16 years ago when there was a big earthquake in Kobe. This means we now had both the experience and the knowledge to immediately start helping the stricken areas. Within a couple of weeks, there were voluntary centres in both Sendai and Iwate. The Sendai one has now closed, but we are still working in the Iwate prefecture.

Rengo set up our own relief work centres, and we coordinate the relief work with the official voluntary centers. More than 30,000 man-days have been put in so far from Rengo alone. Thousands of people have been participating in the relief work: union employees, elected union officials and ordinary members – thousands and thousands of people are taking leave days to help in the clean-up. As much as ten % of the total voluntary work has been done by Rengo.

What has been your role in this relief work?

I am the General Secretary of a sub-regional Rengo office in the Iwate prefecture. After the tsunami, I helped the municipality in the clean-up and I found 40-50 bodies, many of them missing body parts. The job was so hard I had to ask to stop doing it. I couldn't take it anymore.

The union work is also messy, just like everything else connected to the tsunami. One of my biggest problems is that my President is missing. He used to be the one who knew what to do in urgent situations. He has been elected but not yet declared dead because they have not found him yet. What do I do? Can I elect somebody new? What are the rules around things like this? We have anyhow decided that the elections that usually take place in the middle of March now will happen in the autumn.

We from the local union also tried to visit families who lost somebody, especially retired union members. There are no official numbers as to how many people lost their jobs due to the tsunami. Rough calculations estimate that maybe 500 or 800 people lost their jobs in Ofunato city (the city was estimated to have about 41,000 inhabitants before the Tsunami); if other coastal cities are added, the number easily reaches 2,000 to 3,000 people.

What is the situation now for the people in the tsunami stricken areas?

Next to the factory where I work, there is a fish factory. A big freezer hit our factory; the freezer broke, and there was the smell of rotten fish for a very long time afterwards. Small fish can still be seen in and around the factory. 100,000 tons of fish were preserved in the factory but were released all over the city of Ofunato during the tsunami. The stench was awful for a long time!

Especially the days just after the tsunami were rough. People tried to break vending machines, not for the money, but for the drinks. They had very little food to eat.

My son and I found unopened food floating by near our house. It came from a supermarket somewhere. My son said, "Look dad, we have food here." And I answered, "No son, this is not right, we have not paid for it, and it doesn't belong to us." It is like stealing from the supermarket. But we did not have the choice. We took the food, and I still feel guilty about it.

Those who now live in temporary housing and are well enough to work are helping with the clean-up.

I have been lucky. My family is OK, my house is OK, and the employment contract is still there.

What happens now to the business in the region?

Companies in the tsunami stricken area can get employment adjustment allowance that covers 60-80% of the salaries of the employees until the factory is in such a state it can be reopened again.

The plywood factory where I work, for example, counts on starting its production again in January or February 2012. The factory was washed away. Some machines are still there, but demand some three billion Yen in maintenance. It took us more than a week after the disaster to gain access to the factory.

After the tsunami, the first step was to clean up the factory and the next step to relocate the plywood that floated away and to count the stock. Next step is to see what machinery can still be used or needs to be replaced.

Employees from the factory have been walking all over Ofunato, trying to locate logs and plywood from the factory. The logs are mainly cedar wood.

Because the wood is now mouldy, it needs to be cleaned up. There is also the problem of getting the approval of the agriculture standards since the wood has been wet.

The problems we have at my work place are quite typical for most of the industries in the region.

How about your house and your family?

When I finally reached my house on the day of the tsunami, I was happy to see that my wife and son were doing fine. The teacher in my son's school urged him to bring a female friend from school with him home. The teacher sent the children home in groups so they could look after each other. She stayed the night, and the next day I took on the task of bringing the girl home. No roads, rubble and houses, cars and trees everywhere.

What I saw on that day was so shocking I can't even begin to describe. Unfortunately, we also discovered that the mother of the girl had died in the disaster.

Already at 7 p.m. the same day, five hours after the tsunami, the water started to retreat. I was so lucky: the water stopped just metres from my house.

A lot of people in the area are still severely shocked and damaged by the disasters. They react every time there is an earthquake, and the fear of tsunamis comes instantly. There have been so many aftershocks, especially in the beginning. People have started walking different routes just to avoid the worst tsunami-stricken areas.

Interview by Kristin Blom

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