

Forgotten and unattended: refugees in post-earthquake Japan

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Despite being a world leader in disaster preparedness, Japan paid scant attention to the needs of one of its most marginalised social groups after the 2011 earthquake. Refugees and asylum seekers suffered restrictions on movement, increased impoverishment and shortage of essential information.

In the earthquake and tsunami that struck Japan on 11 March 2011, more than 20,000 people lost their lives or went missing. Over 250,000 buildings were damaged or destroyed; some 4.4 million households were left without electricity and 2.3 million without water. Despite enormous amount of relief money and other donations, some groups of people in Japan received little or no assistance. Among these are refugees and asylum seekers.

The impact of the disaster and its aftermath was so devastating that many foreigners – fearing another earthquake and radiation leaking from damaged nuclear power stations – were quick to leave the country. The Immigration Bureau (IB) was inundated with people asking for the ‘re-entry permit’ that they need in order to obtain a visa for another country and to return to Japan if and when things get better. However, under the current asylum system, the IB will not issue re-entry permits for refugee applicants. Asylum seekers therefore had to weigh up the possibility of persecution in their country of origin against the immediate risk in remaining in Japan. While many refugees and asylum seekers did choose to leave, many of

those who stayed felt they had little choice, and no prospect of assistance.

“We have no home to return to. No places to go like others; it’s not permitted. We are stuck in Japan. We are like prisoners; we feel forgotten and unattended. No responsible body is there to take care of us in this crisis, or if things get worse.” (Ethiopian asylum seeker)

Although few refugees and asylum seekers appear to have been in the most affected area of Tohoku, those living in the Kanto-Tokyo region (where most refugees/asylum seekers reside) still suffered considerable distress. The Japan Association for Refugees (JAR), an NGO engaged in refugee assistance, embarked upon a refugee community/home visit project a few days after the earthquake in order to confirm that they were safe, understand their needs, provide counselling and information on the recent events and distribute emergency packages containing rice, flour, cooking oil, pasta, chocolate bars, canned food, face masks, water and sanitary items. Through the visits it has become evident that refugees and asylum seekers

face three main sets of particular challenges related to the disaster.

First, the restrictions on freedom of movement imposed on undocumented asylum seekers loomed larger in the time of crisis. Under Japan’s asylum system some asylum seekers without residence permits are detained while others have ‘Provisional Release status’ (PR) – in lieu of detention – for periods of up to three months, after which they have to request an extension.¹ PR status comes with restriction on the area of movement; to travel beyond the agreed area, an IB permission letter has to be obtained each time. Yet all that the IB did for PR status holders, in the face of the unprecedented chaos, was to issue an unofficial and ambiguous comment that it “would take disaster-related reasons into their consideration.”² In practice, PR status holders were still required to make routine appearances to the IB; some were hesitant to leave their designated area even in emergency circumstances, for fear of punishment.

Meanwhile, detained asylum seekers were stuck. According to some detainees in the East Japan Immigration Centre (about 150 km from the Tohoku area), immigration officers would not let them outside the detention building during the earthquake, saying that there was no need to worry and that “moving detainees outside requires permission from the boss”. It was only after detainees started panicking – hitting locked doors, breaking glass, screaming – that the IB finally unlocked the doors until the following morning. The IB subsequently sought compensation from the detainees for damage done to the facility during the turmoil.

Japan is one of the most earthquake-prone countries in the world and has done more than most when it

Although a signatory to the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees, and the second-largest donor after the US to UNHCR, Japan accepts very few refugees. The rejection rate for refugees in Japan – roughly 95% – is the highest for any industrialised nation. In 2010, out of 1,906 decisions on asylum applications, 39 (2%) were granted refugee status. Recognised refugees are overwhelmingly from Burma/Myanmar – in 2010, 37 out of 39 were Myanmar nationals – although hundreds of applications are made every year by Turkish Kurds and Sri Lankans and those from Middle Eastern and African countries. Cases for refugee recognition can take years to reach a conclusion; during that time, the asylum seeker has limited access to public social services.

comes to disaster preparedness. Every year since 1960, the country marks Disaster Prevention Day on 1 September, the anniversary of the devastating 1923 Tokyo quake. It also boasts the world's most sophisticated earthquake early-warning systems.³ Yet no emergency or evacuation drills or instructions had been in place at the detention centres.

Second, refugees and asylum seekers with economic difficulties have suffered even more since the disaster. Most refugees and asylum seekers in Japan live in extreme poverty. Inadequate governmental support, language barriers and the economic climate are all contributory factors. The destruction of nuclear power plants and the ensuing electricity shortages brought regular three-hour-long blackouts which in turn have forced factories and restaurants – common workplaces for refugees and asylum seekers – to operate for fewer hours and days. Fewer working hours or even layoffs mean an immediate loss of income. And now that almost all available funding resources are directed to disaster-related projects, it has become extremely challenging for NGOs to raise funds for refugee assistance projects.

Third, refugees and asylum seekers have been significantly affected by a lack of reliable information on earthquake and radiation issues. As most refugees and asylum seekers come from countries where quakes are less common or where nuclear

power is unknown, they are all the more in need of information. Access to the internet, Japanese language skills and involvement in their own communities seem to be three key factors determining their level of access to information. But refugees sometimes avoid mingling with the same ethnic communities for fear of meeting people from former opponent groups or organisations. Even when they do have access to the internet, without sufficient Japanese language skills they are apt to depend heavily on foreign media, which have tended to focus more on the seriousness of the radiation crisis than the Japanese media and the government have done. Their fear is further reinforced by suspicions about the authorities in general acquired through their experience of being persecuted by the government in their country of origin.

The case of one Kurdish refugee family illustrates the awful dilemmas they face. The family of six had put down its roots in Japanese soil; they had lived in Japan for more than 10 years and two of the children had been born in Japan. Their refugee applications had been rejected but they were expecting a positive decision by the Minister of Justice on their leave to stay on humanitarian grounds – and then the earthquake hit. The impact of the disaster and the uncertain circumstances pushed them to take a hard decision; fearing for the safety of their small children (having learned that infants are far more vulnerable than adults to

radiation), the mother and children returned to Turkey while the father remained in Japan. They did not have a residence permit and were all under PR status. The mother and children therefore left as deportees, prohibited from returning to Japan for the next five years at least. In short, the family chose to be separated for more than five years rather than to stay together in Japan with the old and new difficulties that they were facing.

In this emergency situation, marginalised populations became even more marginalised and vulnerable. The IB seems too busy with other categories of foreigners to show any care for panicked refugees and asylum seekers and people in general hardly seem to know of the existence of refugees in the society, let alone of their problems. In contrast, some refugees and asylum seekers proved themselves to be supportive members of society. Quite a number of them eagerly raised their hands to support disaster victims. A group of Burmese nationals, for example, was quick to provide curry for 300 displaced people. Detainees in the West Japan Immigration Centre sent what little money they had to Tohoku while Burmese refugee community organisations donated more than 500,000 yen (US\$6,500). Many of them are still regularly visiting the disaster-affected areas to do voluntary work.

As one Ugandan refugee said: "Now is the time to return the favour to Japan for saving my life." Let us hope that this shared experience helps create a society that is more responsive to the needs of all, a society in which no one is neglected.

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1. PR is usually three months for Burmese, one month for others. The refugee application procedure takes two years on average, so they have to renew PR periodically until their final decision is made.

2. telephone conversations with JAR, other NGOs and individuals

3. www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2058390,00.html



Japan Association for Refugees

Asylum seekers from Uganda help in the post-tsunami clear-up in the city of Rikuzentakata.