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. PR status comes with restrictions 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.”

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.
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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