

Sendai, Miyagi in easy English

3.11

– The Great East Japan Earthquake –



仙台国際日本語学校
Sendai International School of Japanese

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—The Great East Japan Earthquake—

At 2:46 p.m. on March 11th, 2011, an earthquake struck a large part of Eastern Japan, especially in the Tohoku region. The earthquake was centered on the bed of the Pacific Ocean toward the east-southeast, about 130 km away from the Oshika peninsula, Miyagi prefecture. It registered a magnitude of 9.0. This was the world's 4th strongest earthquake in the past 100 years.



Where the earthquake occurred.

The earthquake measured an upper 6 on the Japanese intensity scale in 47 municipalities in the Tohoku region. In Kurihara, Miyagi prefecture, it had a seismic intensity of 7.

Earthquake

Weaker

Intensity 0	No one notices any shaking at all.
Intensity 1	Some people notice shaking.
Intensity 2	Many people notice shaking and some wake up while sleeping.
Intensity 3	Almost everyone notices shaking. Dishes make sounds.
Intensity 4	Almost everyone feels scared. Some notice shaking while driving.
Intensity lower 5	It is difficult to walk straight. Books fall off shelves.
Intensity upper 5	Almost everyone stops what they are doing. Glass windows may break and doors may become stuck.
Intensity lower 6	It is difficult to stay standing. Furniture may move or fall down.
Intensity upper 6	It is impossible to stay standing. Almost all wooden buildings fall down.
Intensity 7	It is impossible to do anything. Pavements may be impassable as they crack and heave.



Stronger

Damage and impact depending on intensities

Based on the Japan Metrological Agency's website

In an earthquake measuring an upper 6, it is impossible to stay standing. At the same time, almost every piece of furniture moves or falls down. Furthermore, window panes from a lot of buildings break and some building's walls crack and collapse. Some wooden buildings also collapse. In an earthquake of this intensity public utilities such as gas, water and electricity can be out of service over large areas and serious problems can be caused for people's daily lives. A quake of intensity 7 (the highest level in the scale) causes even more damage.

On March 11th, 2011, the earthquake caused a "tsunami" (tidal wave) which brought devastating damage to the Pacific side of the Tohoku region. In some areas, the height of the tsunami was 10 meters or more.

This earthquake and tsunami are now called the Great East Japan Earthquake. 15,880 people were killed and 6,146 were injured while 2,664 are missing according to the investigation by the metropolitan police department, as of September, 2013.

**A personal record by a teacher from
Sendai International School of Japanese
on the Great East Japan Earthquake
follows in the next pages.**

2:46 p.m. March 11th 2011

I was preparing for my next lesson in the office. All of sudden, I felt a tremendous quake. Feeling unsafe, I immediately left my desk. Shortly after, a whiteboard fell down onto where I had been sitting while textbooks and dictionaries fell from the shelves one by one.



My office right after the earthquake

I rushed into the corridor. There were 20 people crouching in the corridor. We were not able to remain standing. I almost fell down and had to sit. The quake was incredibly strong and lasted for a long time. It felt like being on a boat in rough waters.

It was said that Miyagi prefecture was to be hit by a large earthquake in the near future, so at once I realized it was finally happening. When a small orange emergency light came on, I prepared myself for uncertainty.



The corridor in our school right after the earthquake

Later news reports said the earthquake measured a lower 6 on the Japanese intensity scale in the Aoba-ward, Sendai, where the Sendai International School of Japanese is located. However, I believe that the quake we felt in our school, which is on the 7th floor of the 15-story building was far worse and more intense than the official record.

After the main quake stopped, we evacuated about 100 students who were in our school at that time to the park in front of our school. Not being able to communicate on our mobiles, we had no information at all. However, as we were prepared for the worst possible scenario we might encounter, we ran to a nearby convenience store to buy some food. There were a lot of people in the shop, with no electricity. The shop had already run out of lunch boxes, rice balls and bread. However, there were still some sweets and bottled water left. There were not enough for all of our students but we distributed them back in the park, telling them to share with somebody and not to drink all the water at once.

Going home

An hour after the initial earthquake there were still aftershocks which were great enough to sway trees in the park. Our principal told the students to head home and return at 9 a.m. on Monday the 14th. She also advised them to go to a nearby elementary or junior high school if they needed assistance with their daily lives. Then, everyone went back home.

I usually take the train to go to work but I had to walk back this time as train services had stopped. It was unusual for March but it was snowing. In the city, traffic lights were out and the windows from all the buildings had shattered and broken glass was everywhere. The pavement had cracked and heaved from the quake and there were fissures and ridges in the roads. As darkness set in, it became darker and darker with no electricity.



Broken windows



Cracked and heaved pavement



At around 5:30 p.m., there were no buildings with lights on.

An hour after leaving the school, I saw a building which had lights on. Taking a closer look, I found it was a TV station. As I entered, I saw a TV in the lobby which was airing shots of the sea. Looking closer, I figured out where it was - the screen said “Live at Sendai Airport” in the upper left corner. There were graphics and maps showing almost all of the islands of Japan outlined with red and yellow signifying a warning of a massive tsunami. It took a while for me to understand what it meant. I finally understood the magnitude of the situation. It easily exceeded the worst possible scenarios that we imagined when we evacuated to the park a few hours earlier.

I walked for another hour and arrived home in the dark. It was only 7 p.m. but it was the darkest night of my life.

Inside my house there was no place to step as the floor was covered in rubble. I entered my room carefully with my shoes on, only having the light of my mobile phone. I checked my room, walking over the broken plates and food which had fallen from the fridge. Pieces of furniture had fallen over. Moreover, the electricity and gas had been cut off. I quickly realized that it would be impossible to live there for a while. I immediately drove to a nearby elementary school.



From my front door
taken on March 13th



Inside my room
taken on March 13th

My life as an evacuee

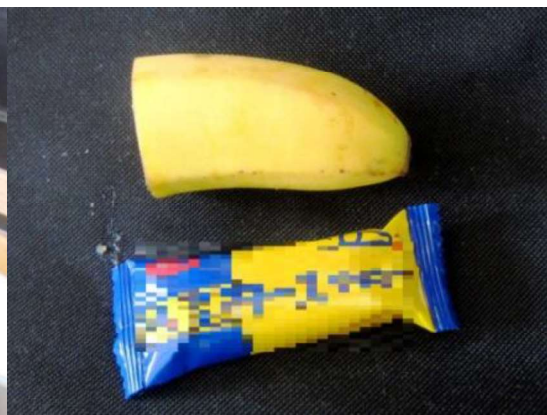
It took only 10 minutes to get to the nearby elementary school. The elementary school had become an evacuation center and was filled with a lot of people. However, I managed to find some space for myself near the door to the library. The noise of the sliding door behind me made a rattling noise similar to rumbling sounds we heard before earthquake began so I felt on edge every time someone used the door to look for their families and friends. Moreover, the radio in the middle of the room kept repeating phrases such as “the number of dead and missing is high”, “we do not know the full scale of the earthquake devastation” and “please stay calm”. I felt like I was having a bad dream. At 4 a.m. on the 12th, thin blankets were distributed. Even so, it was extremely cold without any heating. Having my business suit on, I ended up barely sleeping all night.

Next morning we were each given half a banana and a small piece of cookie for breakfast. It didn't fill me up but I was very grateful since I had not had anything to eat since lunch the previous day.

In addition to blankets and food, gas-powered electric generators were delivered to the school. There were a lot of people lining up for hours to charge their mobile phones for 10 minutes with these generators. There were also a lot of people lining up in the nearby supermarket even before opening time. The supermarket had only instant noodles, bottled waters, snacks, canned foods and so on. To allow more people to get food, people were limited to 5 items each. However, no one complained or tried to jump the queue for the electric generator and in the supermarket.



Blankets



Breakfast on March 12th



Lines for the electric generator



A line in front of the supermarket

In the library, everyone gradually started to take a particular role such as distributing rationed food and drink, obtaining local information and making a list of people in the room and so on. Some people left the elementary school to go home or move to their friend's home. They left useful things such as candles and paper cups, saying "take care" and "do your best". We had met each other only the day before but behaved like a family as we stayed together in one room on the night of March 11th. I ended up staying in this elementary school for 3 days.



The library I evacuated to.



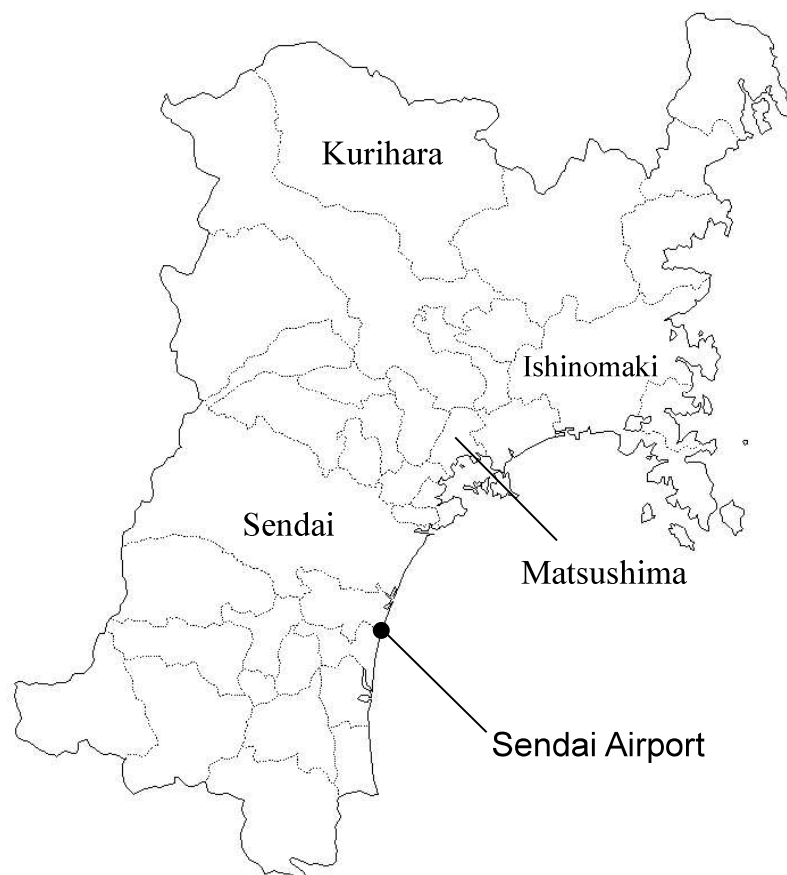
Only candles were available as light after dark

The park

In the morning on 14th, I headed by bike for the park where on the 11th we had arranged to see each other again. When I arrived there, there were only a few students. However, more students than I expected came by 9 a.m. Fortunately, we were able to find out what had happened to almost all of our 240 students. Some students had already left Sendai and evacuated outside Miyagi prefecture or outside Japan and their friends informed us of where they were. It was difficult to survive in the first few days after the earthquake even for us Japanese. I cannot imagine how hard it must have been for our international students. There were students who came from countries without earthquakes. I wondered how much they understood what had happened. Yet, I found them compassionate and resilient as they showed concern for me. They told me that most of our students had stayed in elementary schools or junior high schools being used as evacuation centers. I was relieved by their cheerful looks. On the other hand, I felt helpless since I was able only to provide a little food.

Ishinomaki

Around noon on the same day we heard that one of the missing students appeared to be in Ishinomaki. Being located in the eastern part of Miyagi prefecture, Ishinomaki has the second largest population after Sendai. The media was reporting “devastating casualties from the tsunami”. Ishinomaki is also where I was born and grew up and is where my family lives. I had not been able to contact my family since the 11th so my colleague and I headed by car for Ishinomaki on March 15th.



Map of Miyagi

It usually takes about 2 hours from Sendai to Ishinomaki. However, it took more than twice as long as usual as we had to take the mountain side road rather than the sea side road which was closed. Even though 5 days had already passed, the water had still not completely receded from Ishinomaki so it was impossible to drive in some areas. We had to park our car in a convenience store parking lot on a hill. Then we headed towards my parents' house.



My parents' home neighborhood which is over 2 km away from the coast taken on March 15th

Approaching to my parents' home, I found my mother clearing away the rubble of the tsunami. She called my name when she noticed me. All of my family members came out to see me. They had stayed in a nearby elementary school for the first three days before coming back to their home whose 2nd floor had not been damaged by the tsunami. I had tried to believe that my family must be safe since the earthquake hit even though I had not been able to contact them. I felt relieved from the bottom of my heart. As soon as my grandmother saw me, she started to cry, saying "I'm so relieved that you are safe". Basically, my parents' home wasn't destroyed but its first floor had been damaged. There was a lot of the rubble of unknown origin not only in the garden and the front entrance but also in the bathroom and the kitchen.



Front porch of my parents' home

Since my father gave me information on the flooded area in Ishinomaki, we found it impossible to drive a car so we decided to head by bicycle for the town where one of our students may have been. The air smelled like a mixture of seawater and oil and was filled with the sound of sirens and helicopters. I will never forget these sounds, smells and the view of total destruction of my hometown.



Downtown Ishinomaki



The view from the Hiyoriyama Mountain, Ishinomaki

We rode back and forth, searching for undamaged roads. Finally, we almost reached the area of town the student might have been in. However, the seawater and mud prevented us going any further and we had to give up. On that day, we had to go back to Sendai without any new information on the student.

On March 16th, one of the missing students popped into our school. We also got news by phone about others including a student in Ishinomaki. It took 6 days after the earthquake to make sure all the members of Sendai International School of Japanese were alright.

Loss of a Friend

After a short while, I received an e-mail on my mobile. The e-mail told me that “S”, a friend of mine from my elementary school, had been killed by the tsunami. Living in Ishinomaki, S was working in his office close to the sea when the earthquake occurred. When he heard the tsunami was coming he tried to evacuate by car but failed. He was only 25 years old.

In the first summer after the disaster, S’s girlfriend, other close friends and I got together to drink the liquor that his father had given us. He asked us all to think of S while drinking it. At first, we shared pleasant memories of him with smiles, but by the time we had almost finished the liquor some of us started crying. The liquor, given to us by S’s father, symbolically became S to me. Drinking it helped me accept his death and helped strengthen me for his sake.

The next day, I visited S’s family. S’s photo and flowers at the altar were not enough to make me believe that he had passed away. His mother tearfully told me that she wouldn’t hesitate to die in his place. Even though several months had passed since his death and cremation, his ashes hadn’t been buried yet. Since a lot of people

were killed at the same time, nowhere could be found to build grave stones.

Some of my friends including S were killed by the disaster. Moreover, there are so many people who lost their houses, cars and jobs. The Great East Japan Earthquake deprived us of thousands of things and brought untold grief.

Unsolved problems

Now in September 2013 it is very crowded in the city center of Sendai when we look from our school building. If you visit Sendai for the first time in your life, it is difficult for you to imagine the earthquake really attacked the city. Gas, electricity and water services were restored a several months ago even in the area tremendously damaged by the tsunami. At the same time, necessary things for daily life can be easily purchased again now. My present life is again exactly the same as my life before the disaster. It seems such a long time ago that we had to stand in line for hours to buy food in a supermarket, having no water to take showers for weeks and nothing to do but go to sleep after dark as there was no electricity. The aid from not only inside Japan but also the international community made a huge difference in bringing back our normal life soon after what was the most powerful tsunami in a thousand years.



The Japan Self-Defense Forces cleaning up the street after the seawater receded

However, not everything is the same as before the disaster.

For instance, when you drive a car, you may happen to see temporary housing. More than 20,000 temporary housing units in Miyagi prefecture alone were built for those who lost their own homes in the earthquake and the tsunami.



temporary housing from Saigai Syashin database

Moreover, when you go to the coastal area, you may come across places occupied with mounds of waste left by the disaster.

According to the Ministry of the Environment, the amount of the waste produced by the Great East Japan earthquake is about 18,800,000 tons in total in Iwate prefecture, Miyagi prefecture and the coastal municipalities of Fukushima prefecture. 11,500,000 tons were disposed of only in Miyagi prefecture and it is almost equal to 14 times the usual annual amount of garbage in Miyagi prefecture.



Remaining rubble

Furthermore, various economic issues are left behind especially in the agricultural, fishing and tourism industries. Various problems related to the accident in Fukushima nuclear power plants remain, too. Those who lost their family, houses, jobs and properties face a lot of difficulties even now. The Great East Japan earthquake still has strong impacts on our society.

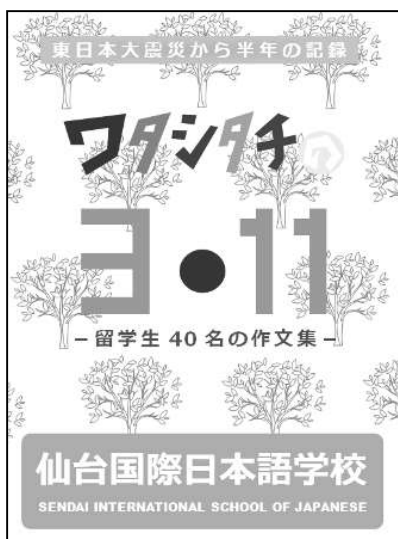
What can I do?

After March 11, 2011, a Japanese word 'fukko' is often used. 'Fukko' means to gain power that is once lost. Both the city and people there are becoming more and more energetic again after more than 2 years since the earthquake. However, it is not easy to say that everything is completely back to normal with all issues resolved. I do not think that there is nothing I can do to contribute to my country or community in terms of restoration. What I can do is keep the people and landscape that were lost in the disaster in my memory and tell my experiences to those who did not go through the Great East Japan disaster.

3・11 Our Experiences

– Essays by 40 international students –

Sendai International School of Japanese



International students of the Japanese language school in Sendai wrote essays in Japanese on their thoughts, behavior and feelings at the time of the Great East Japan earthquake. All Chinese characters are printed alongside Kana to show how they should be pronounced. Some are also printed in English.

『3・11 Our Experiences –Essays by 40 international students-』 can be download as PDF files from the Nihongo Education contents Web sharing System of the Agency for Cultural Affairs.

<http://www.nihongo-ews.jp/>

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Photo credit by Higashi Nihon Daishinsai Shien Jyoho Blog **【Cover page】**

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