Evacuation turns into chance to help victims

Temporarily displaced foreigners rally around to help raise money, awareness

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OXFORD, England — When the offshore Tohoku mega-quake caused tsunami to slam ashore on March 11, crippling the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant, Japan was figuratively as well as literally shaken.

In the disaster zone, communities and families were literally torn apart. In less-stricken areas the damage has been more subtle, but the emotional tremors are still being felt worldwide.

Since the crisis began to unfold, people in Japan and abroad have struggled to make sense of an increasingly tangled thicket of information. Foreign and domestic news sources, government information and personal accounts have presented conflicting reports of radiation levels...
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While Japan maintains the controversial mandatory 20-km exclusion zone and a voluntary 30-km evacuation zone around the crippled plant, many foreign governments have advised even keeping a greater distance.

In the early hours of March 17, the U.S. Embassy began advising American citizens to evacuate from an 80 km radius of the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant complex; some, like the British Foreign Office, maintained that, in addition, their "nationals currently in Tokyo and to the north of Tokyo should consider leaving the area."

With so much information available and even governments disagreeing on the best course of action, many residents of the affected areas understandably became worried about the safety of staying in their homes as the nuclear crisis unfolded.

Though their Sendai home is technically just outside the official evacuation area, British-born Dominic Jones chose to evacuate with his Japanese wife and two young children as soon as the British government recommended leaving the already shaken area. "They were saying that the situation on the ground was much more serious, in fact, on par with Three Mile Island. They also said it's ongoing, so it might even get worse."

Leaving their home was clearly not an easy choice, and, over drinks in an Oxford cafe, Jones speaks as if he's still trying to make sense of his decision. "It's our home. We've been there 12 years, you know, everything is there, our friends, and half our family."

It is, however, clear that because of discrepancies in the way that information is being interpreted, foreign nationals living in Japan are under a lot of pressure from family and friends overseas to leave the country.

"I found news reports conflicting," explains one Nagano Prefecture resident, who will be called Emma for this story. She extended a holiday in Australia because of radiation worries.

"U.S.-based channels like CNN were screaming 'meltdown' and Japanese stations remained calm and collected. Some of our friends, particularly those who have lived in Japan a long time, stopped watching CNN and sensationalized foreign news and reverted to Japanese and English updates and embassy reports due to the drama and fear-mongering of foreign channels. But for non-Japanese speakers, one problem was that Japanese channels only had limited news in English so most foreigners had to rely on overseas channels. If I had not already booked flights home, I am sure I would have experienced a lot of stress with pressure from my family and friends from home, to come home."

Jones confirms this conflict. "There was a lot of family pressure from England. I had all my relatives talking to me, saying, 'Have you seen the news? We want you to come back.' But in the end we went because the British government said that British nationals should leave."

While it may be impossible, as well as unnecessary, for governments to further evacuate the affected area, many residents — natives and foreign nationals alike — have temporarily moved away from northern prefectures and the Tokyo area. Those with small children were particularly concerned when radiation readings temporarily spiked in the capital's drinking water supplies on March 23.

"Quite a few people we knew in Sendai moved to their families outside the area," Jones says. "My wife's family lives in Fukushima. If they'd lived outside the area, we would have gone to them."
Emma’s Japanese husband, Hiroshi, happily accepted his company’s offer to provisionally relocate from their Nagano Prefecture base to a branch office in Osaka. Although the company offered to pay transportation and accommodation costs for staff members and their immediate families, Hiroshi was the only employee who took advantage of the offer. "My colleagues had the same offer, but they chose to stay. A lot of my coworkers who stayed said that they wanted to leave, but that their elderly parents or small children made it too hard to move, even tentatively."

Fortunately, the fears of worst-case scenarios have begun to subside, and while there are still many unknowns, people are beginning to return, if cautiously, to their homes outside the evacuation area. Hiroshi returned to Nagano on March 30, followed by Emma this week. Jones and his family have already left England to return to Sendai to start putting their lives — and quake-damaged home — back together.

Within Japan, many evacuees have taken refuge with relatives in places far removed from Tohoku. Even so, they have turned exile into opportunity, pitching in to help the relief effort from afar.

Cathy Hirano, a volunteer with the Shikoku-based charity organization Second Hand, describes the enthusiastic efforts of evacuees from the crisis who relocated to Takamatsu, Kagawa Prefecture. "A young woman with her mother and two little ones told me that she herself was a refugee from one of the less badly affected areas. She had obviously scraped together whatever supplies she could from home to share with people in greater need. Another 'refugee' in his 20s pitched in every day and rounded up his friends to help as well." Buoyed by such support, Second Hand has been sending truckloads of supplies to the quake- and tsunami-stricken areas.

Others — overseas by choice or necessity — are raising awareness as well as funds for the relief effort. While the easy accessibility of such varied information on the Internet may have caused rifts between those who chose to leave and those who stayed, the Internet is also proving instrumental in bridging this gap.

Fundraising events — both those that are Internet-based and those publicized through websites and social media — are helping people across the world to connect with, as well as to help, those still struggling in the disaster.

Ranging from donation drives to poster sales, these efforts not just raise money for organizations working in the area, they also manage to stave off feelings of helplessness that the evacuees might otherwise find overwhelming.

Jones has been speaking at fundraisers in Oxford to help raise awareness and money for the disaster area. "Ever since we left Sendai, or even before — because I had Internet access, which virtually nobody else did — I was able to keep in contact with people at home, obviously with friends and family, but also media organizations. So from that time it became a charity mission.

"The sole focus was on the people back in Sendai. I feel it's my duty to publicize and keep fundraising. I've been lucky in that I've had the time and the Internet access to be able to become a spokesman. This is all I can do, because otherwise I won't be able to look people in the eye when they ask what I've been doing. It's something I can do to help. Anything I can do to help, I'm doing. And when we go back, we will continue doing things to help."