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PROMETHEUS TRAP (14): Gap grew between Japan, U.S. in providing support

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Editor's note: This is the 14th part of a series that has run in the past under the overall title of The Prometheus Trap. This series deals with the different responses between Japan and the United States in dealing with the Fukushima nuclear accident of 2011 following the Great East Japan Earthquake. The series will appear on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

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A misunderstanding arose between the United States and Japan over disaster relief activities one day after the Great East Japan Earthquake struck.

During a telephone call on March 12, 2011, U.S. President Barack Obama told then Prime Minister Naoto Kan that the United States was prepared to provide every form of assistance possible.

Based on that discussion, the Defense Ministry set up coordination offices between Japan and the United States at the Self-Defense Force Sendai base, the U.S. Yokota Air Base in Tokyo and at the Defense Ministry.

On March 15, Col. Jiro Hiroe, who was the group leader for defense exchange at the Ground Staff Office, was dispatched to Sendai to serve as the liaison officer there.

When he entered a building at the Sendai base, Hiroe found about 20 U.S. military personnel in camouflage gear. They were members of the 3rd Marine Expeditionary Force based in Okinawa. However, they did not know what to do because no requests were being made by Japan.

Sitting on stairways with no heating, the military personnel were gathering information over the Internet using notepad computers.

On March 16, the first joint meeting between Japanese and U.S. personnel was held.

Col. Christopher Coke said a number of times, "Tell me whatever you want."

According to Coke, the Marines arrived in Sendai on March 13. However, he said although the Marines wanted to help, they did not receive any requests or any information. Hiroe felt frustration and distrust toward Japan on the part of Coke.

On March 14, the SDF established a joint structure involving the Ground, Maritime and Air SDF in Sendai to provide support for local disaster victims. However, it would take another week for a logistics system to be established in the area. Because of the SDF's own delay in setting up a logistics network, its members had its hands full and were unable to liase with the U.S. military.

All Hiroe could do was apologize and ask that the U.S. military personnel wait another two or three days.

One example brought up by U.S. officers was the relief effort made in 2004 after an earthquake and tsunami struck off the coast of Sumatra in Indonesia. At that time, U.S. military helicopters dropped relief supplies from the air, which was greatly appreciated by local residents.

However, Hiroe said, "That would be counterproductive to the Japanese mentality. Assistance must be conducted in an orderly fashion. Please wait a while longer."

Hiroe spent a considerable amount of time dealing with his U.S. counterparts on such matters.

It took about 10 days after the disasters for there to be greater synchronization between the two sides.

Through Hiroe's coordination efforts, U.S. Marines were sent to the Oshima district of Kesenuma, Miyagi Prefecture, where the harbor was devastated. They took on the task of rebuilding that facility.

However, the Marines did not simply use bulldozers right away to clear away debris. They first searched for and collected by hand photo albums and wallets that had been scattered in the area.

During Operation Tomodachi, the name given to the U.S. forces relief effort in the Tohoku region, as many as 16,000 U.S. military personnel were sent to the disaster-stricken areas. They were involved in such tasks as restoring the Sendai Airport back to a state in which it could resume operations as well as cleaning schools in the area before the start of the new school year in April 2011.

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The previous installments of this series are available at:

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