Peace Boat rallies help for victims

By ERIKO ARITA
Staff writer

A nongovernmental organization based in Tokyo is recruiting volunteers, both Japanese and non-Japanese, to travel to Ishinomaki, Miyagi Prefecture, and work to help those who are still suffering there after the March 11 earthquake and tsunami.

Peace Boat, a group that promotes international exchange by organizing cruise trips overseas, held orientations in Tokyo on Wednesday for people who want to engage in voluntary work in Ishinomaki, one of the cities hardest hit by the catastrophe.

At the orientation, Takashi Yamamoto, a Peace Boat staffer who specializes in relief activities in disaster-hit areas in Japan and abroad, explained that a lack of manpower has meant that sufficient food, necessary goods and care have not been provided to evacuees even two weeks after the quake.

"In the big shelters in the city, one person can have only two onigiri (rice balls) and a packet of crackers per day, because they don't have enough fuel (for cooking and for vehicles) and manpower (to help provide food and cook it)," said Yamamoto, who reached the city on March 17 and began researching the needs of people who had lost their homes. "We need to bring food, fuel and other goods, and send volunteers to provide hot meals to those who are..."
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meals to those who are suffering."

Although the scarcity of gasoline in the Tohoku region has hindered citizens outside of the area from traveling there and helping evacuees, Peace Boat says that the government has authorized its fleet of vehicles for relief activities, making them eligible to fill up on priority gas in Tohoku.

While it is not yet possible for individuals to enter the stricken areas in Ishinomaki alone, and also because local volunteer centers affected by the disaster are not functioning well, Peace Boat is coordinating teams of volunteers who will visit people who are currently living in shelters, cars or damaged houses and respond to their needs, Yamamoto said.

However, because of severe cold-weather conditions and a lack of accommodation in these areas, volunteers must be physically prepared and bring their enough food and clothes for a week, the duration they will stay in Ishinomaki, Yamamoto said. Volunteers also need to bring a sleeping bag, and if possible a tent.

The Wednesday orientations were attended by some 220 volunteers.

Several non-Japanese also attended the orientations. Two of them, Dave Paddock from the United States and Jeff Jensen from Canada, who together run a Tokyo-based company named English Adventure that runs outdoor programs for kids in Japan, said that they have lived here for more than 15 years and consider Japan their home.

"It's time to help out and we're grateful to have the opportunity," Paddock said. While some foreign nationals have left Japan, he said: "I think many foreigners' concerns and fears are very understandable. And especially for foreigners who may not have deep roots here, it's a very understandable response. I and my friend and coworker, Jeff, we have deep roots here and we own businesses here and have families here. For us, this is our home and this is our community. So we feel very strongly about being here to help if we can."

Peace Boat accepts foreign volunteers even if they don't speak Japanese, said Tatsuya Yoshioka, director of the organization, explaining that bilingual staff or other volunteers will interpret for them as they work together in teams.

"We welcome non-Japanese who wish to work in the affected areas, and I hope they can inform the people in their home countries of the situation," Yoshioka said.

Peace Boat plans to send 50 volunteers to Ishinomaki on March 25. It plans to send more on April 1, 8, 15 and 22. An orientation session will be held March 26 and 30 at 6 p.m. For more information, contact Peace Boat's office at (03) 3363-8047 or e-mail men@peaceboat.gr.jp.

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