

Neighbours helping Neighbours The Story of a Volunteer

11/04/28



“I never thought the simple act of eating would bring so much joy,” says Ekuko Yokoyama. Like many of her fellow volunteers at the Japanese Red Cross, Ekuko was directly affected by the March 11th earthquake and tsunami. “I was in chaos. When I returned to my apartment I saw everything had been ruined. I wanted to focus on something so I immediately began helping out at the evacuation centres.”

It was tough going in the immediate aftermath of the twin disasters. “At first donations were not coming in, because here in Soma City we are not that far away from the damaged nuclear plant and people were concerned about radiation contamination,” she says. “We tried our best to estimate how much to cook, how to ration so we didn’t run out of supplies. It was very hard. The volunteers didn’t eat at all, except for maybe one or two candies a day. Now things have stabilized somewhat. We do have enough food now. But I definitely don’t take my meals for granted anymore.”

Volunteers are the backbone of the Red Cross Red Crescent. Ekuko, a 35 year old resident of Fukushima prefecture, began volunteering eight years ago. She spends her days helping to distribute items to the roughly 600 survivors who now call a community centre in Somo city, home. Items like food, toys for the kids, clothing. She helps with cooking the hundreds of meals that are required every day, while other volunteers visit still-standing houses to begin clearing them of the mud deposited by the giant waves.



But still, she is one of only a handful of Red Cross volunteers who are able to help out at this evacuation centre. “Many volunteers were also affected by the tsunami,” says Ekuko, “therefore, they aren’t able to help out as much. For those of us who are able to lend a hand, we are working in a very stressful situation. But we see others and we remind ourselves that even though we are also suffering, we are still luckier than many who lost absolutely everything.”

As she plays with a little boy, Ekuko worries about what will become of this group of people if they have to keep living in this evacuation centre for months on end. “The evacuees are under so much stress. There aren’t any organized activities for the kids. We need teachers here to help. The adults are now starting to argue and fight with each other. The fishermen are concerned about their jobs in the future. We are all scared of the nuclear situation. We are afraid of what we can’t see.”

For now though, Ekuko approaches life one day at a time, as she tries to make each successive day a little more comfortable for evacuees than the last. And she makes a promise to herself, to not leave these people, her neighbours, her countrymen and women, until each and every one is also able to move on.

Photo(above):Ekuko talks to a little boy in the Evacuation center in Soma city, Fukushima
©Kathy Muller/IFRC

Photo(below):Volunteers cooking hot meals in the Evacuation center in Aizuwakamatsu city, Fukushima ©Masaki Kamei/JRCS