

## **Six Months on: Japanese Red Cross helps tsunami survivors face up to an uncertain future**

**By Francis Markus**

2011/09/07



It's been six months since the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami that devastated huge areas of north-eastern Japan. Nearly 20,000 people are dead or missing and 6,800 people are still living in evacuation centres in the affected prefectures including the three worst-affected prefectures of Iwate, Miyagi and Fukushima. While rapid progress has been made towards helping communities to recover, the future remains uncertain for thousands of survivors, particularly those displaced by contamination from the damaged Fukushima nuclear reactor.

“Given the enormous scale of the destruction and the massive area affected, this will be a long and complex recovery and reconstruction operation”, says Tadateru Konoe, President of the Japanese Red Cross Society. “It will take at least five years to rebuild, but healing the mental scars could take much longer.”

(Photo: Many boats are washed up river and run aground in the fishing port of Kesenuma. A huge fishing vessel sits in the middle of the town. (c) Nobuyuki Kobayashi)



## Key role in response

In the wake of the tsunami, the Japanese Red Cross has played a key role in emergency response and recovery efforts. With a network of 92 hospitals across the country, the Red Cross has been a leading provider of medical care in tsunami affected areas. Since the disaster, a total of 820 medical teams have been deployed to run mobile clinics for survivors.

The Red Cross is continuing to provide psychosocial support to people remaining in evacuation shelters and those who have moved in to temporary homes, especially the elderly.

“One of the main problems people face on moving into temporary housing is a sense of isolation, because they don’t know their new neighbours,” says psychosocial nurse Yuko Mitsuhashi, who has more than 30 years of Red Cross experience.

One of the priorities has been to restore a sense of normality in the lives of people who have lost family members, homes and livelihoods. The Japanese Red Cross has already provided a package of household electrical appliances to 91,000 families who have moved into temporary homes. The programme, which is funded from donations received through Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies worldwide - and other donors such as ECHO, the humanitarian arm of the EU - will be expanded to reach around 110,000 families.

The Red Cross has been a major recipient of public and corporate donations from within Japan. These funds are being distributed to survivors in the form of a series of cash grants, which go some way towards compensating families, all of whom have suffered significant economic losses. In some areas the tsunami wiped out 85 per cent of local businesses and now, many people are struggling to find work.

(Photo: Japanese Red Cross is currently providing seminars on psychosocial support for those who went through devastating disasters.)



## Fukushima needs challenging

Meeting the needs of families evacuated from the vicinity of the damaged nuclear reactor in Fukushima continues to be a major challenge. Ayako Yamada and her family have started a new life in a temporary house provided by the government. It’s likely they will remain there for a few

years.

“On the one hand we really want to go back, but on the other, we know we can’t,” says Ayako, as she sits somberly with her mother and son in the family’s new home about 60 km from the damaged reactor. They have been able to pay one brief visit back to their house, now within a 20 km exclusion zone, dressed in protective clothing to retrieve items such as a photo of her deceased father. But that is it.

Red Cross volunteers are organising regular events to make life for survivors like the Yamada family more sociable, helping them get to know their neighbours and preventing a sense of isolation. Japanese Red Cross teams are also offering medical assistance and first aid for those in Fukushima who are making temporary visits back to their homes in the exclusion area and there are also plans to provide hospitals in the area with whole-body radiation measuring equipment.

(Photo: Staff members from Government, TEPCO and another electric company help the evacuees to be able to make temporary home visits. The first round of home visits started in May and finished in August. There are 4 entry points to the exclusion zone, and Red Cross is helping at the largest one in Minamisoma, 21km from the power plant. Here, a Government official is testing the radiation level of people returned from their home visit.)



### Temporary hospitals

Another key part of the Japanese Red Cross reconstruction plan is to support the building of temporary hospitals. It’s expected to take around five years to erect new, permanent hospitals as part of the government’s plans to reconstruct devastated towns and there is an essential need for such temporary facilities.

“The prefabricated hospital is getting too crowded. It is too hot in the summer and will be cold in the winter,” says Dr Sakurada, a surgeon, who’s working in Minamisanriku, where the Red Cross has agreed to support the building of one of the new temporary hospitals, beginning in the New Year.

(Photo: Shizugawa Hospital in Minamisanriku is now operating in prefabricated facilities. There

are 9 different clinics and receives about 200 out patients per day. It also has emergency room. But there is no beds for inpatients to stay. (c) Nobuyuki Kobayashi)