Earthquake/tsunami disaster

Fishing town totally collapsed by March 11 earthquake and tsunami

Mr. Taikai Kumagai, who publishes the News from Ports ("Minato-dayori"), a community paper for distant-water fishing vessels, in Kesennuma, escaped to a hill when the tsunami attacked the town. He was astounded to find how dramatically the town changed after the earthquake and tsunami. In the special issue on the Earthquake disaster of the News from Ports, he gave us a detailed account of the devastated state of Kesennuma after the disaster.

OPRT obtained Mr. Kumagai's permission to reprint part of the News from Ports, along with his message conveying the condolences to those who died in the earthquake and tsunami and heartfelt sympathy to those who lost their houses and property and are still compelled to lead a life of refuge.

Premonitory quake occurred two days before

The number of the dead and missing in the great earthquake and tsunami that assaulted the Pacific coast of northern Japan at 2:46 p.m. on March 11 this year already exceeded 20,000, and its number is increasing day by day.

An omen of the disaster had been observed two days before. A quake of magnitude 7.3 had occurred, with the epicenter being in the depth of about 10 kilometers at around 160 kilometers east of the area off Kinkazan. In Kesennuma, a seismic intensity of 4 had been confirmed, while, in Tomai City 40 km toward inland, an intensity slightly lower than 5 had been recorded.

In the coastal town of Kesennuma, tension heightened at the fishing port during the daytime, with the tsunami alarms sounded three minutes after the occurrence of the earthquake.

The Great Earthquake this time came two days after this premonitory quake occurred. The earthquake lasted for an unprecedented interval of 2 minutes and 36 seconds, with the tsunami attacking the town about 15 minutes later. Immediately after the quake, about 15 coastal fishing vessels and one passenger ship, which could not return to the shore, faced a direct frontal attack of the tsunami.

Fishermen at Karakuwa District of Kesennuma, who survived the disaster, unanimously said that, in the course of decades of their life at sea, they had never seen such high waves. The traces of the giant tsunami were laid.

(Photo caption) The road to the commercial wharf (seen in the photo just above) was made impassable as the ground near the fish market of Kesennuma sank about one meter. On the left side is the Kesennuma Bay. A dangerous situation persists because it is impossible to mark the boundary between the land and the sea.
March 11, 2011 became an unforgettable day for Japan. The earthquake and tsunami of unprecedented scale that attacked a broad area of the Pacific coast of eastern Japan devoured Kesennuma, a tuna fishing base in Miyagi Prefecture, in an instant. After the tsunami, an unrealistic scene, as in a dream or illusion, emerged in the town -- large scale tuna fishing vessels sitting on land here and there like monuments created by artists. In face of this unimaginable disaster, tuna fishermen, both in Japan and overseas, are moving to the rescue of the tuna fishing base in Kesennuma. However, many thoughts passed through the mind of tuna fishermen in Kesennuma amid the actual confusion on the spot -- a mixture of the strong commitment to restore the community and the confused situation which cannot be explained away only by admirable stories.

Immediately after the disaster, Japan Tuna Fisheries Cooperative started, on behalf of the tuna fishing industry in Japan, to transport necessary commodities to Kesennuma using a vessel of one of its group companies. OPRT interviewed Mr. Yasuo Sato, Executive Director of JTFC, about relief activities.

**Top priority was confirmation of safety of the crew and their families**

**QUESTION:** What was the first thing JTFC did after the disaster?
SATO: What we did, first thing first, was confirmation of safety of cooperative members. We judged that the top priority was safety of our member shipowners, crew and their families. From the night of the day the earthquake happened, we used every possible means to confirm their safety.

QUESTION: We hear that JTFC took a great trouble in trying to transport commodities to Kesennuma after the earthquake.

SATO: Yes. As a ship of one of our members was near Kesennuma at the time of the tsunami, we asked it to head to the port as soon as possible. You may think it is easy for a ship to go to the port, but in actuality it involved great difficulties. A large heap of debris, piled up on the sea bottom, created a danger of propeller entanglement that could cripple the ship's movement or have the ship strand on the heap of rubbles. We could not have the ship to proceed to such a place with ease. In the worst case, the ship will be rendered non-useable. We received kind offers from many shipowners for using their vessels, but we might have caused a great trouble if grave accidents occurred in the tsunami-hit areas. So, while thanking for the kind offers from them, we coped with the situation with much caution.


SATO: After inquiring the people in Kesennuma, we learned they were short of medicines and pharmaceutical products. They said there was a stock of medicines near Kesennuma but they could not transport them because land transportation routes had been shuttered. We judged that ships can provide a suitable means of transportation and planned to take medical and pharmaceutical products to Kesennuma with cooperation of shipowners and citizens of Misaki, a tuna fishing base in Kanagawa Prefecture adjacent to Tokyo. The owners of tuna fishing vessels in Kesennuma requested that we send commodities that may be needed by all the citizens of Kesennuma - not the commodities needed by tuna fishermen themselves. I really felt a deep sense of respect to such a request by tuna fishermen made amid unbearable hardships.

QUESTION: We heard that transportation of medical and pharmaceutical goods required more complicated work than expected.

SATO: Yes. You cannot send pharmaceuticals in the same way as food and clothes. You cannot purchase them if you had not doctors' prescriptions. So, we contacted the Kesennuma Central Hospital through various means and requested it to place orders for pharmaceuticals they needed most. This is how we started preparations for transportation. There were also rules and regulations in the pharmaceutical industry but we had gained their understanding and cooperation.

Goodwill and assistance can become easily ineffective

QUESTION: What was the volume of pharmaceuticals you transported?

SATO: We prepared the amount worth Y20 million. Initially, the orders placed by the hospital in Kesennuma were in big volume worth nearly Y100 million, but, for the time being, we decided to deliver the volume worth Y20 million at the expense of our cooperative in the hope to serve the need during period until land-transported medicines arrive.

A large amount of commodities and money were delivered from JTFC members, and municipalities such as Kagoshima, southern Japan, and tuna fishing bases in prefectures throughout Japan, such as Kochi, Mie, Shizuoka and Kanagawa. We delivered those goods and money by sorting them out so that confusion may not be caused in the disaster area. I am sure that those relief goods were received with gratitude.

QUESTION: Now, we can see the delivery of pharmaceuticals alone became a matter of great complication.

SATO: First I thought that sending various goods out of goodwill would help people in the disaster area. But later I came to know that it could turn into misplaced kindness in the tsunami-hit places. Commodities not carefully sorted out cannot be used. Also, going to the area in person for help would not provide assistance at all. We did have willingness to help, but we racked our brain most on what would be truly useful for the people in the midst of tribulations. It can occur that goodwill alone will prove to be ineffective. We tried as much as possible to refrain from forcing unwanted favors on suffering people.

Support for Kesennuma people's commitment for restoration is crucial

QUESTION: Do you think that Kesennuma can survive as a tuna fishing base?

SATO: I firmly believe that Kesennuma will revive as a tuna fishing port. As Mayor Shigeru Sugawara says,
OPRT renewed website to celebrate its 10th anniversary

OPRT has renewed its website in March this year, marking 10th anniversary after its establishment in December 2000. We are pleased to report that the number of our member organizations increased to 24 from many parts of the world in the course of this period.

The renewal featured, among others, visual showing of OPRT Activities through Photos, Editor’s Blog, more readable presentation of OPRT activities and information related to tunas and tuna fisheries, as well as easier access to articles of interest. Through the new website, OPRT intends to enrich the quality of tuna-related data and information in the days ahead.

It is our hope to use our homepage for gaining greater understanding of, and support to, OPRT’s activities for the realization of responsible tuna fisheries by as many people as possible.

We welcome your constructive comments and opinions.

URL: http://oprt.or.jp/eng/

Japan restricts Pacific bluefin tuna catch from April

In light of the fact that Japan is the largest fishing and consuming nation of Pacific bluefin tuna, the Fisheries Agency of Japan announced to implement the following measures from April to comply with the management measures adopted by the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC).

1) Total annual catches of juvenile fish less than 30 kg taken by large and medium scale purse seine vessels in the west of Kyushu Island and the Sea of Japan are limited to less than 4,500 tons (as compared to 6,100 tons in recent years)

2) Total annual catches of adult fish more than 30 kg by large and medium scale purse seine vessels during spawning period (June-Aug.) are limited to less than 2,000 tons (2,300 tons in recent years)