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Operation Usuzan - Disa

STORY & PHOTOS
 BY KEN JOSEPH JR.

Oh, no! Not again! This thought hit me almost physically as I saw the sudden news flash of the explosion of the Usuzan Volcano on the northern island of Hokkaido. The TV bulletin brought back memories of the Shimabara Unzen Volcano that exploded the same way nine years ago. Our Japan Emergency Team was the first group to arrive at that disaster scene and we battled for more than a month as ash rained down on the small Kyushu city.

At the same time flashbacks of similar disasters in Japan from the Okushiri, Hokkaido, earthquake, Kagoshima flood, Hachinohe earthquake, Niigata earthquake, Nasu flood and the mother of them all—the Kobe earthquake—sparked my memory with scenes of unforgettable damage to property and human souls.

Having a disaster team in Mozambique at the terrible flooding at the same time left our team stretched pretty thin, but an urgent e-mail message to our volunteer members elicited an immediate response. Just a few hours later, the first team, loaded down with supplies, boarded the night train for Hokkaido.

As we prepared to board the train, we were informed that we could go only part of the way and we would have to find our own way as the tracks had been damaged. First thing in the morning we arrived at Hakodate, as far as the train could go. Now to move all the supplies—including blankets, instant food, water, canned food, milk, rice—to another train. It soon became a group effort as the train conductor and other workers helped move the supplies and eased the job.

We all piled aboard, supplies in tow, the absolute last train at the last station open, Oshamambe, Hokkaido. There, we faced another nightmare moving the supplies up and down stairs, again with the kind help of the JR staff and passersby, we loaded our bundles onto a ve-

hicle to go to the

A stop by the station to cross appeared the final stopped to talk and discovered another explosion nobody was going

Now what to

15-minute trip to the Disaster Center, hub of the relief operations in Date City, was an 11-hour train trip around the mountain. Despite our pleas and demands, nobody was going to pass. Even though we had permission, it was issued before the explosion. There was nothing to be done.

Resigned to the inevitable, we returned to the station, repeated all our efforts moving the supplies, then began the long, torturous trip around.

Literally 11 hours later, we finally arrived at the Disaster Center. A bit of encouragement? The cities of Kobe and Shimabara had sent official communication to the city of Date introducing our Japan Emergency Team, telling them of our efforts in their disaster and requesting utmost assistance in our operations. After a quick introduction to the city officials, we delivered the supplies we had brought and checked out our new office. Only then, did we head to the Emergency Shelter to get some sleep.

Having worked at every domestic disaster in Japan over the past 10 years, I have spent a total of more than six months in such emergency shelters, usually set up in gymnasiums, schools or churches. But this one was amazing! Nearly 400 people crowded into a local gym! The biggest problem after the cold—remember it is Hokkaido!—was surely the unbelievably annoying buzz of snoring from 400 temporary homeless people crowded into one big room! We quickly found a place in a corner; fellow evacuees brought over blankets and we were set for the night.

Early the next morning, Operation Usuzan was in business and we began, as we always do in such situations, to set up telephone and computer systems, find a local partner and begin direct operations. A look outside the window and we found our partner—a church literally across the street

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Usuzan smoulders & coughs between eruptions.

from the Disaster Center. A quick visit with the pastor (who knew us well), some prayers together and we had an address to which to send emergency supplies as well as a local guide and staff.

More fun! The other pastor in the town just happened to be a former student of my dear Dad and said, "Ken-chan, you sure have grown since I last saw you when you were four!" By then the rest of the team was in control at the Disaster Center, handling volunteers, setting up information on each emergency shelter, receiving incoming disaster supplies.

Team members with time spent in Turkey, Kosovo, and Shimabara had a wealth of hard-earned experience to share with the flustered government officials trying to cope with the situation. I am beginning this from Date where the team has been since Mar. 31 and, while things have calmed down, the situation remains quite serious.

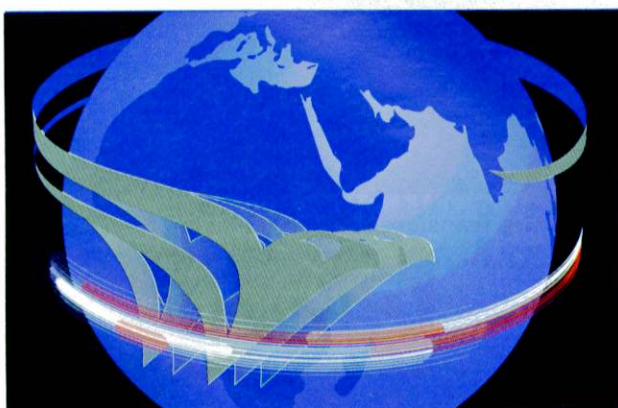
Nearly 8,000 people are still unable to return to their homes; our work today and yesterday included preparations for moving nearly 1,000 people to new shelters, preparing food to give out three times a day, sorting and labeling disaster supplies ranging from food to clothing and working at long-range plans.

The Japan Emergency Team began its mission in 1989 when 38 students from Chuo University volunteered to assist with the San Francisco Earthquake, thus becoming the first non-government overseas disaster operation from Japan.

(Continued on Page 2)



Displaced from their homes by Mount Usuzan volcano, residents crowd into gym.



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Japan Helpline disaster team in action

Tokyo volunteers aid victims of volcano eruption

(Continued from Page 1)

It was a dark, dreary day when I had to give a speech to the assembled group of 120 students. I was very discouraged and trying to think of a way to breathe some life into an otherwise predictable speech. I mentioned to my hosts that I would like to ask if any of the students might be interested in going to San Francisco to help out. The administrators panicked! An official said, "Ken-san, you can't do that! You know students these days are so self-centered, uncaring to start with. None of them would respond and, beyond that, we as a school cannot take responsibility for such an enterprise. Please do not bring it up!"

Well, that was all I needed to suddenly get un-depressed! "You mean the kids you are teaching are no good and I can't give them a chance to respond to a disaster?" I asked incredulously. "Yup!" They were pretty clear!

Well, then it became fun! Suddenly another boring speech in front of a bunch of bratty kids became a bit more interesting. After I finished, I began to talk about the terrible earthquake that had struck San Francisco a day earlier. The school officials were signaling from the back to stop! But I proceeded: "There was a terrible earthquake yesterday. People were killed. Property is in a shambles. Why don't we do something together! How many would be interested in taking a few days off school and going to San Francisco to help?" Immediately—much to the consternation of the frantically gesturing school officials—20 students raised their hands.

The school officials came on the stage and shouted, "You promised you would not do this!" I replied, "But look at the kids you said were worthless... 20 have already indicated they want to go!" "We can't take responsibility for such a dangerous trip," the official said. "Please stop this right now and tell them what a big decision this is and all the problems they will face."



Above: JR employees pitch in to help relief team load food and supplies aboard train-reload. Below: our author Ken Joseph Jr. schleps large bundle of supplies between trains.



Well, after all, they had invited me, so I told the youngsters to lower their hands. "If we go it will be a nightmare," I told them sincerely. "You will have to pay your own way, you will probably stay in a tent, it will be cold and rainy in San Francisco. And you will probably come back sick, exhausted and poor. If you still are absolutely sure you want to go, we will take a break now and you can come to the back of the room and we'll talk." The school officials were pleased! Now for sure none of the kids would respond after a warning like that!

Well, the surprise was theirs—after the strong reality check, the number of the hardy band of 20 hopeless, self-centered, bratty kids had not only not diminished, but increased to 38!

The school authorities—thoroughly confused since they saw their task as one to sternly control these terrible kids—were stunned, their theories suddenly shot full of holes, turned to me and wearily said simply, "Just get out of here."

A few days later, the first volunteer team of Japanese to go on an overseas disaster operation took off. By chance, former President Ronald Reagan had been in Tokyo and had seen news of their going and invited them to his hotel room to tell them how much he appreciated their help. This reaction forced the Foreign Ministry to scurry for cover and made it impossible for them to deny the applications pending for emergency passports.

Well, that team of kids who went to the tiny town of Watsonville in the Bay Area and worked with the Salvation Army for nearly two weeks has grown to more than 600 and since then has gone China, Hong Kong, Russia, India, Bangladesh, Taiwan, Kosovo, Turkey, Iran, Jordan, the U.S., Haiti, Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, and just about every disaster within and outside of Japan. Ours was the first group to arrive at the earthquake disaster center in Kobe on Jan. 17, 1995.

Back to Hokkaido... As I begin to write this, the greatest need we have is for people who can spend a day or more on site sorting and delivering boxes of relief supplies, including canned food, sleeping bags, tents, instant and canned food, soap, towels, bottled water, rice, powdered milk, laptop computers and cellular telephones, unused NTT telephone cards to help place calls out of the area.

Our really big need is for something that we have been desperately trying to get since the 1995 Kobe Earthquake—a Disaster Relief Vehicle. A DRV is a modified RV that can sleep up to 10 in a disaster, provide hot water to prepare coffee and food. It can be hooked up so emergency medical care and other relief assistance can be given on a mobile basis.

In Kobe a quick e-mail request brought the kind donation of a motorhome which was transformed into a



Disaster team partners from neighborhood church.

Disaster Relief Vehicle and completely and immediately improved our operations in Kobe a thousand percent.

The Usuzan Volcano disaster situation is scattered over a wide area and the lack of such mobile assistance is greatly hampering efforts. A search has produced a Disaster Vehicle, a U.S.-made Winnebago, 28-feet long, that the owner has agreed to sell for nearly half the honest cost. If we can find a few sponsors willing to "adopt" the DRV, we can have it on site in 22 hours via the ferry from Hamamatsuchō. Not only will it help the current disaster which will go on for at least six more months, but also will be on call 24 hours a day to enable our teams to rush to any disaster either in or outside Japan via ferry. In appreciation, The Japan Emergency Team will gladly display the logo of the sponsoring parties on the vehicle. This is one of those times when we really need help! If you can spare even a day, it would really make a difference to some of the nearly 8,000 unable to return home after spending long days and nights in the cramped, cold disaster center.

The team is hoping there will be a person or corporation that will individually or with a few others help sponsor the Disaster Relief Vehicle so it can be used in Usuzan, then be kept on 24-hour standby for the future. Anyone who can assist please contact Operation Usuzan at team@jhelp.com. Donations can be made to Postal Furikae Account 00160 7 162348 or sent to The Japan Emergency Team, 65, Tokyo, Japan 106-8691. Supplies can be sent to: Operation Usuzan The Japan Emergency Team c/o Date Church, 59-23 Kashima, Date-shi, Hokkaido, Japan 052-0024. Please put the number 0120 46 1995 on the package. Thanks in advance from all of us for your help.

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