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Japan

# Japan: a natural, nuclear, human and social disaster

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**Lying as it does at the meeting point of four tectonic plates, the Japanese archipelago is no stranger to natural disasters. Without being able to predict the date, Japanese seismologists knew that a major earthquake threatened the coast of Miyagi and Ibaraki Prefecture. It happened on March 11.**

## Natural disaster

An earthquake of rare power, it caused a devastating tsunami and has surpassed the worst disasters in modern Japanese history. Over several hundred kilometers, the coast has been completely devastated, with entire villages and towns wiped out. The number of dead and missing is increasing and it will undoubtedly exceed the twenty thousand already announced.

The determination and endurance of the Japanese have largely been highlighted by the international press eclipsing all other realities. The inhabitants of the prefectures affected feel abandoned by the central authorities. Relief has been slow to arrive. The humanitarian disaster looming in Japan, in addition to recent disasters in Pakistan, Australia, the Indian Ocean, Haiti, and New Orleans, reminds us that it is not possible to rely upon governments to manage such crises.

## Nuclear disaster

And if this disaster were not bad enough, Japan also faces another one that is not remotely natural. The question is not whether a nuclear catastrophe will happen: it is already happening. The entire area around the plant in Fukushima has been condemned, and will remain so for a very long time. The radioactivity released day after day in the atmosphere has begun to contaminate parts of the archipelago, depending on the direction of the winds and precipitation. Contrary to what the Japanese authorities claim, there is already an accident of level 6 or 7, much worse than Three Mile Island in the United States (1979, level 5), and closer to Chernobyl in Ukraine (1986, level 7). At the time of writing, the situation remains out of control.

The question now is how far the nuclear disaster - or rather disasters - will develop. It is hoped that the plant workers, firefighters and soldiers sent to the front to try to cool radioactive storage pools and reactors manage to avoid the worst. Many 'liquidators' in Fukushima have already paid with their lives for the criminal irresponsibility of the nuclear lobby, as was the case for tens of thousands of 'liquidators' of Chernobyl without whom it would have been impossible to prevent a level 8 accident. In 2011, as in 1986, we owe them a great deal.

## Humanitarian catastrophe

Throughout its history, Japan has faced many destructive earthquakes and tidal waves. In 1995, an earthquake measuring 8 on the Richter scale destroyed much of Kobe city in southern Honshu. The ineffectiveness of the emergency response was then seen as a national tragedy. It was believed that Japan was now better prepared. However, one of the most striking aspects of the current crisis is the government's inability to provide a rapid and

adequate response to the plight of populations in affected areas. Relief for the victims has only arrived in dribs and drabs. Nearly 500,000 people who were evacuated from high-risk areas around the nuclear power plant in Fukushima and who themselves crammed into shelters could count themselves lucky when the temperature dropped below zero degrees. Tens of thousands of people remain isolated in the devastated towns without water or food or electricity. Hospitals in the region are severely damaged and are no longer able to care for those rescued. The threat of an epidemic is ever-present.

It is doubtful that the lessons of previous disasters have been drawn. Japan, however, is not Haiti or Pakistan but the third largest economy in the world. But let us remember the tragic helplessness of the government of the United States after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005.

## Social disaster

Inequality increases instead of being reduced in times of humanitarian crisis. This has been the case during every major disaster experienced in recent years whether tsunamis, earthquakes, wars, or economic collapses ... By undermining public services, demonizing solidarity and making insecurity into a virtue, capitalist globalisation and neoliberal policies throw more oil on the fire of injustice. Whatever one might say about its traditions, Japan is no exception to the rule. The propertied and powerful try to make workers, the poor, the powerless pick up the bill.

The government of Naoto Kan is at its lowest point in the polls (17.8%). A year and a half after his historic victory against the Conservatives, who had been in power since 1955, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) has abandoned any intention to pursue a policy focused on improving living conditions, protection of pensions, the creation of a social safety net, and reforming the political system as announced in his election campaign. The current disaster gives him temporary respite, but his handling of the crisis should not give anyone any illusions. Witness the way he has clearly and in concert with the company responsible for the Fukushima plant - Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) - consistently downplayed the nuclear "accident", which was officially considered a level 4 and then eventually, level 5, when everyone could see that it was more serious than Three Mile Island.