

Speech by JRCS/IFRC President Tadateru Konoe to Foreign Press Center,  
Tokyo March 7, 2012:  
Audience: foreign correspondents

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good afternoon.

As I stand here in front of you, almost a year to the day, after the massive disaster which we are all here to reflect on, I think the best place to start is to pause for a moment and ask ourselves what we are feeling right now as we think back to the events of last March...

There is great sadness, still, certainly at the loss of life and destruction; perhaps a sense of unreality; maybe thoughts about our own role in how events unfolded.

For me, there is a sense of pride: Pride in the way that hundreds of Japanese Red Cross medical teams and thousands of staff and volunteers responded and helped to meet the needs of so many injured and traumatised survivors - and I will come back to that in a few minutes;

There is gratitude at the overwhelming and generous support we received from all over the world...

But above all there is a sense of humility and a willingness to see what we can learn from this overwhelming experience and what we can do better in the future.

This feeling is particularly strong when it comes to looking back at the events of the nuclear crisis in Fukushima.

We Japanese have long thought of ourselves as one of the most disaster-prepared nations in the world – and in many respects, with the systems we have in place, we remain the world leaders.

Even tiny children in Japan instinctively grab their cushions and burrow under their school desks to protect themselves as best they can in the event of an earthquake.

And the lessons people have learned about how to react if a tsunami is coming in to shore, helped to save many thousands of lives, which might otherwise have been lost – although the magnitude of the tsunami last March far surpassed our previous experience.

But what should people do to prepare themselves for a potential nuclear accident? And how should people respond if a worst-case scenario comes to pass?

The picture that has emerged is one of lack of sufficient information before the accident and confusion and uncertainty after it.

Many people who grew up near the nuclear plant say that all they were told as children was that in the event of anything going wrong, they should stand in the playground and would be given pink pills to take.

And even after the radiation (radioactive substances?) began leaking from the Fukushima plant, some say that they were evacuated to places where the radiation turned out to be higher than other places.

It is easy to look for people to blame and focus ones anger on. But what we in the Red Cross Red Crescent are focused on is what we can do to help safeguard people if such a disaster were to happen again.

Here in Japan, we have already started to incorporate more information about nuclear hazards in the Red Cross first aid courses which we provide to children.

We are of course sharing the expertise which we have in our Japanese Red Cross hospitals – both those in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, who have specialised expertise in radiation, and others – to help provide greater understanding to those affected by the disaster in Fukushima.

Our volunteers specialised in providing psychosocial support are helping the communities evacuated from around the nuclear plant to face up to the issues which they have to deal with in their daily lives.

And we are actively seeking a role for the Red Cross in monitoring the health of survivors in Fukushima prefecture, something which may be needed for decades to come.

But we can do more and we will do more.

As the world's largest humanitarian network, we in the Red Cross Red Crescent have a unique strength in our ability to bring together the experience and best practice gathered by our member national societies - and to apply it where it is needed.

That is why the Japanese Red Cross together with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies has taken the lead in bringing our international partners in the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement together on this issue of preparedness for nuclear accidents.

We plan to host an international conference on this issue here in Tokyo in May.

The aim will be to begin the process of drafting a set of guidelines setting out how Red Cross Red Crescent Societies can play a role in promoting better preparedness for nuclear accidents.

We will begin this process with a sharing of information and knowledge – including for example the experience of the Ukrainian Red Cross and its fellow national societies who for the past 26 years have been involved in dealing with the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster. In Belarus, Ukraine and Russia, our fellow Red Cross societies have provided screening to more than three million people, with more than 200 cases of cancer still being diagnosed each year.

The American Red Cross has valuable experience to share, having played a critical role in the response to the Three Mile Island nuclear accident.

The German Red Cross has an important role in the monitoring of radiation in their country, which can be of relevance elsewhere. And so on...

The guidelines which will emerge from this process will not be prescriptive, because the context varies greatly from country to country and one size will not fit all.

But what we aim to come up with is a range of options and best practices from which national societies can adopt those which are useful in their particular situation.

We hope that this will be an important contribution which the Red Cross Red Crescent can make to ensuring that if anything like Fukushima should happen again, we will be better prepared.

Of course what we faced last March was a triple disaster – earthquake, tsunami and nuclear accident – so the lessons to be learned are not confined to the nuclear sphere.

After every major disaster, we in the Red Cross Red Crescent take very seriously the task of reviewing how we have responded, and what can be

improved upon. And the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami is no exception.

In their 86 page report on the Red Cross operation following the disaster, the reviewers have come out with a number of recommendations: such as better contingency planning for mega-disasters, more consideration of bringing in emergency teams from abroad; more effective deployment of our human resources and work to strengthen our corps of trained volunteers.

I want to assure you that we are taking seriously these recommendations and applying them to the way we operate and prepare for any future eventuality. In the Red Cross and Red Crescent context, the feedback of such learning will not be limited to Japan, but naturally to be utilised by wider Red Cross Red Crescent players in elaborating the preparedness for similar eventualities worldwide.

At the same time, as the president of a large organisation, it is my job to encourage and motivate our staff and volunteers and to praise their efforts where such praise is deserved

And there is much to be proud of in the way Japanese Red Cross staff and volunteers responded. Hundreds of our medical teams altogether, in rotation from the 92 hospitals which we run, deployed to the disaster area and earned the gratitude of the nearly 90,000 injured and shocked survivors whom they treated.

The way in which our psychosocial nurses and volunteers have worked with the populations crammed into the evacuation centres and later dispersed in temporary housing, has made a major difference to people's lives. Of course there is still much work to be done in making sure that a mainly elderly population doesn't fall into emotional isolation and physical inactivity in these temporary housing settlements.

With the generous donations amounting to more than 53 billion yen, made through Red Cross Red Crescent societies over the world, we have been able to increase our efforts to meet the needs of those who have survived this massive disaster.

We have provided 125,000 families living in temporary housing with a set of six electrical appliances, including rice cooker, microwave oven and refrigerator. These have helped to make them as comfortable as possible, despite the difficult and cramped conditions.

We have given extra support to the most vulnerable, such as the elderly and children – providing for example more than 1,000 special beds to elderly care homes, as well as vehicles.

We have provided equipment to nearly 170 schools, as well as many school buses; an indoor playground for children in Fukushima, whose parents are afraid to let them play outdoors; we are supporting the reconstruction of several hospitals, both temporary and permanent; we are providing radiation measuring equipment both for use on patients and to test the radiation levels in food product as part of our longer term commitment to serve the needs of survivor communities; The Government of Kuwait has generously donated 40 billion yen, which is being channelled through the Japanese Red Cross to the three worst-affected prefectures, to help with their reconstruction and recovery.

We should not forget that in addition to the international support, of course, there has been a truly impressive response from members of the public within Japan, donating a total of 310 billion yen – and we are still receiving more 400 million yen every week, which goes to providing cash grants for the disaster survivors. In the light of that, we have decided to extend the period of domestic donations until September this year.

I'm not going to list exhaustively every aspect of the operation. But what's significant is that many of these activities are ones that are new to the Japanese Red Cross experience

I welcome that and I hope that we will continue to expand our horizons with new ways of serving our humanitarian goals.

What we face in the years to come is a big task, with reconstruction likely to prove a slow and complex process.

The survivors will continue to need our support and we will continue to need the support of our international partners.

Let me return for a moment to the opening theme of what our feelings are and how they will evolve: for those who have lost loved ones, we hope the sadness will ease with the passing of time; there will eventually be increasing hope and optimism.

The pride in the good work we have done needs to remain because it helps to motivate us; but we also need to hold on to the gratitude and the humility in order to stop ourselves from becoming complacent and make sure we learn the lessons of experience as we move forward with our tasks.

Thank you.