

## 3.11: How I Saw It

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What a horrific scene it was. Places where houses and buildings had been, and where people had been walking and working, were washed away. Driving through the area with my wife and daughter four months after a magnitude 9.0 earthquake and tsunami struck Japan, I met school teachers and others who had lost family members. Despite their tragic experiences, I was encouraged that many of them were trying to recover from the shock and were working hard on behalf of their families and their communities.

This was truly a massive disaster. Japan experienced the largest earthquake and tsunami in one thousand years, only to be accompanied by a nuclear accident. No country has ever experienced such a triple disaster and no country ever should.

My impressions are not very different from other people's. Nonetheless, let me spell them out.

First, great friendship and solidarity were extended from people around the world to Japan. Rescue teams, donations, offers of expertise and volunteers. At the top of the list was the United States.

Two of the first rescue teams to arrive in Japan came from Los Angeles, California and Fairfax, Virginia. When the Virginia team returned to the United States, I went to welcome them. I was touched to see that entire families, including little babies, were there to meet the team members at three o'clock in the morning. These families must have been anxious about the team members' safety.

More than 50 nuclear experts from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) and the Department of Energy (DOE) were sent to Japan, and many more worked from here in the United States. Not only nuclear experts, but officials from many areas worked with us day and night. The US forces initiated a massive search and rescue operation called *Operation Tomodachi*. "Tomodachi" means friend in Japanese. More than 24,000 personnel, 24 ships and 189 airplanes were deployed.

Companies and individuals, including youngsters, from around the country sent donations through the Red Cross and other channels. Many sent us adorable cards and chains of one thousand paper cranes. Others organized events to solicit contributions. I was invited to speak at the Kennedy Center in the presence of four ex-Presidents and at the National Cathedral, to give a university commencement address and to make remarks at a District of Columbia elementary school graduation. I traveled to many US states—including Massachusetts, New York, California, Alabama, Oklahoma, Colorado and Alaska—where I had the opportunity to discuss conditions in Japan and to express our gratitude for the support offered to Japan by Americans and others around the world. I felt

enormous goodwill wherever I went. I was convinced that the old saying of “a friend in need is a friend indeed,” is indeed true.

The US government invited boys and girls from affected areas in Japan to play and improve their baseball and softball skills. Mr. Cal Ripken invited them to his stadium to coach them. The children’s eyes gleamed. Also present were Mr. and Mrs. Anderson, the parents of Taylor, a young American teaching assistant who lost her life in the tsunami. Taylor’s passing was tragic, but just as she loved Japan from her youth and wanted to be a bridge between the two countries, her parents are now carrying the torch. The Andersons are soliciting funds and are donating books and bookshelves to several schools in Taylor’s memory. They are now personal friends of mine and my wife, Yoriko.

Second, I must say that I am proud of the way that my compatriots have been dealing with the 3.11 tragedy—with grace. No riots were reported. People stood patiently in queues to receive supplies and medical treatment. That is not an easy feat, and people around the world took notice. This showed the resilience and dignity of the Japanese people.

And third, regarding the nuclear accident, we learned that the two most important elements in responding to the situation were speed and transparency. I visited the site with President Obama’s Assistant for Science and Technology, Dr. John P. Holdren. While there, I expressed my appreciation to all of the workers who are sacrificing their private lives and contributing tirelessly to control the situation.

Unlike Chernobyl, the reactor vessel itself did not explode. At this time, radioactive material contamination levels have returned to normal in most areas of Japan. The Japanese government and the relevant electric companies briefed the press and the diplomatic corps regularly to share as much information as possible. Also, Japan has submitted a preliminary report to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on the lessons learned. We sincerely hope that this will be of use, especially to those countries who are now trying to introduce nuclear power generation.

We are now on the road to recovery. The Japanese government has decided to have open reconstruction, which means that we welcome foreign countries and companies to participate in our recovery efforts. Supply chain interruptions, resulting from Japanese firms that sustained damage from the earthquake and the tsunami, have almost been completely resolved. I was happy to learn that major Japanese companies did not lay off workers in the United States, even when production levels were very low. Some companies even paid for workers to go and assist in the relief efforts after tornadoes and hurricanes hit the southern states.

However, one concern that we have now relates to the misperception in some countries that it is not yet safe to visit Japan. We have seen more than a 30 percent drop in the number of tourists. We are grateful that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Tokyo one month after the disaster, and as I write this piece in late summer, Vice President Joseph Biden is visiting Tokyo, as well as affected areas in Japan. These visits signal to

people around the world that Japan is safe to visit. I hasten to add that we are grateful to Lady Gaga and Justin Bieber for their visits to Japan as well.

We will recover from this disaster, but future generations of Japanese should never forget the enormous support and goodwill that we have received. On behalf of all of the Japanese people, I would like to say:

“Kokoro kara arigatou gozaimasu,”

or

“Thank you from the bottom of our hearts.”