

**Lecture by Mr. Nobutaka Shionomiya,
Ambassador of Japan to Portugal
On the occasion of the “Hazardous Future Conference”
November 12th 2011, Convento da Arrabida**

1. Introduction

[PP1](#)

(1) It gives me a great pleasure to have an opportunity to speak at the “Hazardous Future Conference”. I would like to talk to you about the great disaster that has occurred in Japan in March 11th, and how the Japanese people reacted to this.

(2) As you know, the addition of the three factors: the earthquake, tsunami, plus the accident of the nuclear power plant resulted in such a grave disaster. Today, I would like to focus on the earthquake and tsunami.

2. Natural Disasters and Japan

[PP2](#)

(1) There is an old Japanese saying: “The most terrifying things on earth are earthquake, thunder, fire and typhoon.” Hence, the battle with natural disasters has been part of the Japanese history.

(2) Yet, regarding the earthquake and tsunami, today’s Japan is the most prepared and advanced society, psychologically, materially, and culturally.

[PP3](#)

(3) We have accumulated knowledge from the history of natural disasters, and the measures against them. A lot of time is allocated on how to react in the case of an earthquake, not only in school but at home as well. For example, the first of September is the “Disaster Prevention Day”. On this day, local communities, schools, companies all over Japan work together with the central and local government to have a disaster drill.

[PP4](#)

WThe Great Kanto earthquake with a magnitude of 7.9 has struck the Tokyo metropolitan area on this very day in 1923, leaving about 142,000 people lost and missing, 100,000 people injured.

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(4) The earthquake in March had a magnitude of 9.0 and caused a strong shake we have never seen before in Japan. In spite of this, the damage of people crushed to death by the collapsing buildings has been extremely low, thanks to the earthquake countermeasures developed over time.

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On the day of the earthquake, all the Shin-kan-sen, the Japanese bullet train, which were running in more than 200 km/hr in the affected region stopped automatically.

(5) The habitants reacted to the earthquake mostly in a cool-headed way as were expected, in spite of the timing of the incident, which happened around 3pm. When the family members were in separate places; those in the workplace or at home, children in school, and so on, for instance.

3. Earthquake in Haiti

(1) Before getting into my next topic: Tsunami, I would like to share my experience with another earthquake. You may know about the Haiti Earthquake that happened last year.

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(2) In January last year, an earthquake with a magnitude of 7.4 hit the capital of Haiti, Port-au-Prince. It destroyed most of the city, including the collapse of the Presidential Palace, the Japanese embassy and even the residence of my acting ambassador. I was in Haiti, 3 days after the earthquake, and I saw the severity of the situation.

(3) Haiti is a poor country with the income per capita of 600 dollars. The building regulation does not exist in practical terms. The estimated number of death is said to be between 200,000 to 300,000. Most of them were crushed to death.

(4) Few days later, despite the miserable situation, people barely showed signs of fatigue or did they look sorrowful. The markets in the streets were back soon. Those who survived the quake gathered in an open space and patiently waited for the international aid to come. Such a phenomenon was something I did

not expect. Haiti faced political instability and crime filled in the streets with gangs for a long period. So, it seemed to me as if the Haitians may feel such a catastrophe just as a part of their daily tough life.

(5) Anyhow, I never expected that a year later, bigger Earthquake would hit my home country, and to see my people suffer so much.

4. Tsunami

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(1) Now, returning to the subject about the Tsunami which has inflicted tremendous amount of damage and destruction. Among 15,836 dead and 3,652 missing, most of them were the victims of tsunami.

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(2) We believed that we had sufficient counter-tsunami measures to protect the people in the area. These measures, which have been planned in reference to the past 100 years of tsunami damages.

In fact, the biggest earthquake with the estimated magnitude of 8.3 to 8.6 brought about a big tsunami in the year of 869, mid of 9th century, in the same area as the March earthquake. The experts have known such historical facts, but regrettably it was not reflected on the concrete policies.

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In order to not forget about the lessons, our ancestors have kept records by writing about the past serious disasters on stone monuments, which can be seen all over Japan.

5. Post 3.11 Earthquake

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(1) In March, Japan failed in protecting their people from the natural disaster, since the size of the tsunami exceeded our expectations. But afterwards, the traditional spirits of the Japanese people were displayed, reacting together to this emergency.

The March earthquake showed the positive aspects of the Japanese people. The people affected by the disaster helped each other naturally; quickly formed a autonomous system, sharing foods, shelter, medicines, and so on. Very few crimes were committed. Similar reactions were observed among the several hundred thousand people in the metropolitan area who had difficulty in returning to their homes after the earthquake, due to the paralyzed public transportation.

These are probably the result of the traditional mentality of the Japanese people. We have strong ties among each other and on to the society. We prefer to act in groups. We have the tendency of being always conscious about other people.

[PP12](#)

In a difficult situation, such of the disaster, many Japanese were reminded of “kizuna” - human ties among people. Since we cannot live alone. We need help from others, from the people in and out of Japan.

Now, celebrating the 78th anniversary of His Majesty, and wishing the further development of our friendly relationship, let me propose a toast:

[PP11](#) back

(2) Today, the Government is working hand-in-hand with the local governments and making every possible effort in the recovery operations. Such efforts include the construction of temporary housing, the removal of debris and supporting the livelihoods of people affected by the disaster. Substantial progress has been made, in comparison to the situation immediately after the disaster.

Prime Minister Noda has expressed his strong determination to bring the nuclear power plants accident under control, saying that without the revival of the Fukushima Prefecture, there will be no restoration of trust and confidence in Japan.

(3) Most prominent difference between this natural disaster and those of history was the damage done to the nuclear power plant in Fukushima and subsequent problems with radiation. It also had a severe impact on the supply of electricity to the Kanto and Tohoku regions, resulting in a 40% loss to power supply capacity.

Japan is still undergoing hardships but continuing effort to recover from the disaster and to form an even stronger nation by uniting.

6. Conclusion

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(1) If natural hazards such as earthquakes, tsunamis and typhoon strike vulnerable communities, it can cause a catastrophe. Vulnerability depends on the community's capacity to cope with and recover from its impacts. Since the Japanese people have many experiences with disasters, I want to believe that we have a power of "resilience" in our DNA.

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(2) Finally, I would like to express my sincere gratitude for the sympathy and the cooperation, which the international community has given us after the Earthquake on March 11th. Eight months have passed since, but such generous supports have very much encouraged the people of Japan and gave us hope to move forward. Japan will never forget this. Thank you very much for your attention.