

P IS FOR PANIC - DON'T. TURN OFF THE NEWS AND GET BUSY.

I have just come back from Miyako, in Iwate prefecture. You have probably seen the video clip of the fishing boat that washed over the seawall and got pushed against a bridge. Then the clip ends. What happened to the boat? Did it get swept under the bridge, or did it stick there? Answer: it stuck there. I saw it.

I was with Martin Ghent, trying to get some solid answers as to what is going on at the north end of the disaster area, as we could approach from the north. We started at the port of Hachinohe, in Aomori. There, damage was restricted to the immediate waterfront. It is bad news for those who lost their fishing equipment, but there was little damage to housing at the south end of town. I can't say what it was like further north, as we didn't go there.

We proceeded down the coast road, and started seeing inlets where the water came over the road, then hamlets where the houses across the road were flooded in the lower story. A common result was that water broke the windows on the front, flooded in, then burst out the side and back walls. In some cases, the first story collapsed sideways, leaving the second story almost intact.

We were unsure what we would find at Kuji, the first fairly large harbor in Iwate. The wave had gone over the levees along the river, and many houses were flooded, but the locals seemed to be getting things in order, and the only person we asked about helping out just said we should ask at the town office. We decided to move on.

Our first big shock came at Noda, south of Kuji. The bay seems to have been lined up with the tsunami's direction. The railroad rails had been thrown clean across the road, which had just recently been cleared to one lane. As we passed through, we could see Japan Self Defense Force (hereafter, JSDF) personnel at work. Roads near the shore were cleared, but both sides were a mass of rubble. It extended far into the valley on a wide front. We were being waved on by emergency personnel, so kept going.

The next towns, Fudai and Tanohata, were on higher ground. Despite the strength and length of the tremors, there was little structural damage to buildings that were above the high water mark.

The road dipped down near sea level at Omoto, a small fishing town. As this coast has a sad history of serious tsunami, a gated seawall 30 feet high had been constructed here and at the next village, Taro. The wave topped both. Since as a result of the last serious tsunami in 1966 (it wiped out nearly every house in town), the government had built this very impressive structure, it is likely no one heeded the warning to leave. The lower town was smashed again. The wave extended up the valley for at least ½ mile, destroying houses that were out of sight of the beach, around an outcrop of mountain.

The part of the village on the other side of the valley was undisturbed. The roads had been cleared, and the JSDF had moved on. We saw one man out walking his dogs, 3 others trying to recover gasoline from a wrecked mini truck, and a member of the local fishing co-op, sitting on the bridge in his truck, staring at the carnage with teary eyes. He said he and his home were all right, but how many of his friends and relatives had lived in the jumble below? I suspect very few of the missing were recovered in the first sweep. Many will be buried deep in the wreckage; others swept out to sea. How does one process a disaster of this proportion? There is no church in this town. Who will these people turn to for comfort? Most were probably nominal Buddhists, practically agnostic or atheistic, and indifferent to religion. There is no church in this town.

Martin asked the man about conditions in town. He said there was no food in the stores, but when we offered him some of the things we had brought, he hastened to say he was fine, they didn't need anything. There seems to be a feeling that others are worse off; that it would be selfish, or an imposition to accept anything. Martin kept him talking while I put 4 boxes of apples and juice in the

back of his truck. We asked him please to take them to the shelter, on behalf of the people of Aomori, who wanted to help. He then accepted them. We told him there were people praying for them, and left. He thanked us, but I felt it was to him just one more strange event in a welter of events he was unable to process as yet.

If you want to help, if you go to the site, be prepared for a reaction which may seem near indifference. I am not an expert, but it seems the victims do not yet know what to do about anything, including offers of help.

We went over the pass to the next town, Taro. It was hard hit; the JSDF had only recently gotten to it, and they were not allowing people to pass through in the daytime (6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.). It was 4:30, we were low on gas; although we had the name of a church in the next town, Miyako, we didn't know the pastor, and they weren't expecting us. It was hard to turn back, but we decided to return to our friend's house in Misawa, Aomori, where we could possibly get more fuel, and stay overnight. In answer to prayer, we passed a gas station which had just received some fuel. They word wasn't out, there was no line-up, and he was willing to sell us some gas. Otherwise, we would have had to ask our friend to come and get us.

It is easy to become a burden rather than a help, if you do not plan and prepare adequately.

The next day we borrowed our friend's diesel van, as it had fuel and Martin's truck didn't. We went to Morioka Bible Baptist Church in Iwate Prefecture (Conservative Baptist). The pastor, Mr. Kondo, is a friend, so it was easier to get co-operation than just going in cold. He wanted to visit a church he knew of in Miyako. It is just south of the furthest point we had reached the day before, but this time, rather than go down the coast, we went in from the inland plain.

The main trunk lines of both railway and highway run from Sendai through Morioka and on to Hachinohe and Aomori city, which connects to Hokkaido by ferry. The devastation in Sendai, and the problems at the Fukushima nuclear plant (just south of Sendai) cut this vital supply line. Most of our goods come to the north through Sendai; either on the rail lines and highway, or through the port. That is why there is such a shortage of fuel; it cannot be moved north. Plans are afoot to re-route supplies along the west coast rail and highway links, which are lower capacity, but undamaged.

Similarly, since goods cannot be moved along the coast easily, they are reportedly piling up along this inland corridor. They have to be moved out to the coast along a series of roads that link the inland corridor to the coast. The one into Miyako from Morioka is rather narrow, winding, and the crossing takes nearly two hours. This, coupled with the fuel shortage, makes it a real bottleneck. Hopefully this will be sorted out soon. I suspect that reusable things like bedding and clothes will be in sufficient supply, but there will be an ongoing need for food, toiletries (cleanup is dirty work), and paper hygienic products (toilet paper, tissues, paper diapers, etc.)

The independent Miyako Community Church is a small congregation, originally started by Norwegian missionaries. The daughter of members there attends Pastor Kondo's church in Morioka, so we had her contact her father (DoCoMo texting was about the only communication system operating at the time), so they would know to expect us. When we arrived, the pastor, Pastor Iwatsuki, was out visiting emergency shelters, as he had been every day. We talked to his wife for a time, then set out to see how the town was.

Mrs. Iwatsuki told us the church had electricity and water by the second day after the tsunami. The building was undamaged, and, except for being cold, as they had no kerosene, everything seemed fairly normal. Apparently there was at least some food in the stores. Imagine our shock to see that the wave had come to within 100 yards (meters) of their building! It is right on the river, but the wave didn't come over at that point, nor did it come as far as their house on the street.

As we moved along, damage quickly increased from wet floors to flooded first stories to buildings wracked and battered by debris. The roads had been cleared. The flotsam, mixed with slimy mud, was piled like snowdrifts a yard deep on both sides of the road. We had wondered why so many cattle feed trucks were on the road; it turns out they were carrying lime powder to disinfect the streets and floors. The white powder was dusted over everything. Locals had moved in right behind the JSDF, and were piling flotsam from their buildings on the drifts of trash cleared from the street. Everything imaginable is mixed into the smelly piles. Where will these tons of garbage be put? How many of these buildings will need to be pulled down? Will they be replaced, or will people give up on this part of town?

The pastor's wife told us there were 3 kinds of refugees. Some stay at their ruined homes, probably in the hope that missing family members will return. Some have no house left, and go to the shelters. Others have their houses intact, but are afraid to stay overnight in the lower part of town. The elderly lady in the house across from the church was one of these.

I would venture to say that no one is without some food and water, and that shelter is available if needed. How people react varies a lot. There are tremendous needs, but it is not easy to just walk in and find something to do. No one knows you, or your motives; no one is sure what to do next; no one wants the responsibility of telling you what you can do.

We had taken a variety of supplies we were told were needed. It was evening before we found anyone who would take them. As it turned out, the best place was the temporary distribution center housed in the water department. There, they were more than happy to get what we had, as the replenishment of supplies in the shelters was coordinated from there. That is the key: you have to know how the local system has been set up, or you waste a lot of time. Having a local contact is vital.

The big issue as of today, and probably for days to come, is the availability of fuel. At the disaster site, priority is given to emergency vehicles- obviously. Outside, there is an attempt being made to insure everyone gets enough to heat their home, and get to work. If you cannot get enough fuel to get in and out of the disaster site, don't go. It is strictly BYOG- bring your own gas. This applies all the way from Morioka to Aomori.

All of this will change- probably fairly quickly. Martin and I are working with Pastor Kondo and others to try to guide those wishing to help, so they will not be frustrated, and be a frustration to others. Please pray for us, for the victims, and for the JSDF, police, and firemen who are on the cutting edge, hours a day, in the snow these last two days. Local police and firemen apparently lost a lot of their colleagues, who were near the beach before the tsunami struck, trying to get people out. They are brave, overworked people who deserve our respect.

In a nutshell, it has been a jarring experience. This sort of disaster is not unusual in human history, but it is difficult seeing it firsthand. The boat you saw being driven under the bridge was a passing image; the actual boat is still there. Who is going to move it? We have a long road ahead of us.

John Elliot, Ajigasawa, Aomori, Japan, March 18, 2011.

