The 10th Anniversary of Japan’s 3/11 Crisis: An Interview with Ambassador James Zumwalt

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- Ambassador James Zumwalt, Distinguished Non-Resident Fellow, Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA

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On March 11, 2011, the strongest earthquake to ever hit Japan struck just off its northeast coast. This triggered a massive tsunami, killing thousands and displacing hundreds of thousands from their homes. The damage caused by the tsunami would also trigger one of the worst nuclear disasters the world has seen. Ambassador Zumwalt was serving as Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo at that time, where he coordinated the U.S.’s support for the Japanese Government’s response to the crisis. He shares his experience in Tokyo from that time.

The following transcript is taken from a conversation between Ambassador James Zumwalt and Riley Walters.

Riley Walters:

Ambassador Zumwalt, thank you for joining me today. We’re coming up to the 10th anniversary of 3/11, sometimes called the Great Tohoku Earthquake, or Japan’s Triple Disaster. Can you go through the events that happened ten years ago for those who might not be familiar with 3/11?

Ambassador Zumwalt:

It was at 2:42 in the afternoon on Friday, March 11, that Japan was struck by the second largest earthquake ever recorded in human history, registered at 9.1 on the Richter scale. I had experienced magnitude 7.0 earthquakes that were quite destructive in California. This time was 100 times as strong. The earthquake was 240 miles away, but even where I was in Tokyo, the building was shaking, we could hear the pillars creaking, things fell off the table. It was quite scary.

I was in a meeting with some Japanese Foreign Ministry counterparts, including former Japanese Ambassador to the United States Sugiyama, who at the time was the Director General for Asia. We all crawled under the table, because that's what you're supposed to do when there's an earthquake -- to find a safe place in case things are falling. And when the earthquake ended, I went back to the U.S. Embassy. It took a while to assess the situation.

It rapidly became clear that this was a major disaster. And even more destructive than the earthquake itself were the subsequent tsunamis. In some cases, the tsunamis were over 40 meters high, which is like a 12-story building. And in some places, these tsunamis reached up to 15 miles inland. Unfortunately, in Japan, people live in the lowlands, they don’t live on rocky mountain sides. The places where the tsunamis were the most destructive were the places where towns and villages were located. So it resulted in 22,000 deaths, and 400,000 people left homeless. And this is a time when it’s still winter in northern Japan.

In fact, it was snowing that afternoon, and you had so many people whose homes were destroyed, that were out in the cold, with very little shelter with no food, no heat, because there was no electricity. It really was a major humanitarian disaster.

The next day, we learned that there was trouble at one of the nuclear power plants at Fukushima, which have very large nuclear plants that were generating electricity for Tokyo. These nuclear power plants were not designed to withstand tsunami of that height. And so several of the nuclear power plants were flooded. You know, you think of a power plant producing electricity. But in fact, the power plant also
needs electricity to run the plant, and those connections were damaged. Several of the backup systems were also damaged. A series of problems at the Fukushima plant compounded upon each other.

Japan experienced a compound disaster of earthquake, tsunami and a nuclear crisis all rolled into one.

Riley Walters:

What was your role at the Embassy in Tokyo before the crisis and after? I imagine work at the embassy changed very quickly.

Ambassador Zumwalt:

Friday started as a normal day. And then suddenly, everything we needed to do changed.

One of our big roles, from the U.S. Embassy perspective, was gathering information and conveying it back to Washington, so people in Washington could make informed decisions. For example, Washington sent out engineers from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, and they sent out this very special equipment from the Energy Department. So initially, part of our role was gathering information and sending it back to Washington.

But another role that U.S. embassies have is helping American citizens in distress. In a normal life, Japan's a very safe country, there's good medical care, very few Americans show up at the embassy doorstep, needing help. The Japanese system takes care of them. But after the earthquake and tsunami, of course, things were very different. When I mentioned there were 400,000 homeless people, that included some American citizens in the regions affected by the tsunamis. There were also a lot of missing Americans. And what I mean by missing is people were unable to contact their relatives in the States. We were tasked with trying to locate these people.

So we sent out teams up to the tsunami-affected regions, to try and locate and help Americans and then evacuate them down to Tokyo where they could find shelter and get transportation home. Part of our task was taking care of our own community of embassy families as well.

We also sent teams out to the airports because we were concerned they were going to be chaotic. We sent out a consular team to Haneda and Narita airports, and notified the airlines that we have people there. We were there to assist airline customers who needed help. As it turned out, Japan was very well organized. Japanese people are very resilient and rather stoic in the face of a crisis. So it wasn't as chaotic as we had feared. But we were gearing up to try and be helpful to the American community.

One other function of the American Embassy is to issue passports to American citizens. After the nuclear crisis, suddenly, many Americans wanted to leave right away. And some of them realized, oh, my passport expired, or I never applied for a passport for my newborn. So the demand for this service for about a week was severe.

We ended up extending our hours. Normally, the Embassy American citizen citizen’s section working hours are nine to five. We extended our hours open to the public until 8pm. We were now open on Saturday and Sunday. And we took out ads in the newspaper and said the U.S. Embassy is extending its hours.

There were two purposes for the ads, one was to inform Americans they could come in foro help. But there was a second purpose, and that was to demonstrate our presence. Many foreign embassies
began closing up and leaving Tokyo because they were frightened. I would say 50 or 60 embassies, including some major countries, all closed up and left. The Japanese press started talking about foreigners abandoning Tokyo. We wanted to explain that no, we’re not leaving. We’re friends with Japan. We’re allies and allies don’t abandon them when there’s a crisis. You know, we were here for you. It’s like the expression of, a friend in need is a friend indeed. That was part of the purpose of the ads, to show Japan that we were not going to abandon Japan.

Riley Walters:
What were some of the challenges you faced?

Ambassador Zumwalt:
Tokyo was far away from the epicenter. But even we were experiencing aftershocks and rolling blackouts, which never happens in Tokyo. Japan has a very reliable electricity network. But now we were experiencing rolling blackouts and people began panic buying. You could no longer find bottled drinking water. Tokyo has convenience store on every corner. In normal times, one can walk into a convenience store, and find 150 varieties of bottled drinks. That situation changed, because people began hoarding as a reaction to uncertainty.

One other major challenge that Japan faced was that they did not really know how much radiation was going to be released into the atmosphere and what kind of advice they should be giving to people living in the area.

The U.S. National Institutes for Health has done a lot of research on cancer and on radiation illnesses and the impact of radiation exposure to cancer risk. They sent out a medical doctor who had done a lot of work for the United States government. What he told me that he had done a lot of thinking about the impact of a possible terrorist attack on a nuclear power plant in the United States. So while it wasn’t a terrorist attack, we faced a similar outcome. We had radiation leakage.

He came to Japan and remained for about a month giving advice to the Japanese medical establishment about criteria for prudent decisions on evacuation zones. He already had wonderful contacts with Japanese counterparts.

Another challenge was communication. The Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta sent us a health risk communications expert. She was the kind of person that in normal times, would help the CDC encourage people to get their flu vaccine, or talk about the risk of Zika. And how to mitigate risks. She helped us at the embassy, figure out how to explain some complex concerns about radiation in terms that a layperson can understand.

For example, as we were putting out information on radiation levels in Tokyo, instead of saying “the level is so many millisieverts” she would add, “that's the equivalent of eating two bananas.” So she was very good at helping us convey scientific information in a way that the average person going to our website could understand. As a result of her help, the U.S. embassy website became a very credible source of information as the crisis unfolded.

Riley Walters:
Can you talk a little more about the U.S. response to the crisis in Japan?
Ambassador Zumwalt:

I’m very proud of the United States response to the tsunami. I think, as a government and as a country, we stepped up and really helped out. There were many entities in the United States government that came forward. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission, which is the entity that regulates our nuclear power sector, sent several former plant managers and engineers to Japan. One of the challenges that Japan faced was that after explosions at the plants, people couldn’t go near because they didn’t know how much radiation remained. The Energy Department set some advanced sensing equipment, designed to measure from an airplane just how much radiation remained on the ground.

Another U.S. agency that came to help was USAID. USAID has an Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance whose role is to help countries that have experienced natural disasters. So they sent us an experienced individual, to help with the U.S. humanitarian response. And his mantra was to focus the initial response on logistics.

He reminded us that Japan was a developed country, they didn’t need clothing. Americans, who are very well intentioned, would try to donate used clothing. But accepting these well-intentioned donations would only clogging up your logistics network. So his point was, we needed to identify the most critically needed items to transport to affected sites. It turned out what the shelters needed was drinking water, emergency food supplies, diapers, and medicines. And so we deployed U.S. military helicopters and trucks to transport these critically-needed supplies.

The U.S. military stepped up in a big way. Operation Tomodachi was the U.S. military operation designed to assist the Japanese Self-Defense Forces in their support for affected communities. Operation Tomodachi reversed the normal relationship between our two militaries. In most of our bilateral training exercises, the U.S. military is in charge and the Japanese assume a support function. Operation Tomodachi was the opposite. The Japanese were in charge. And we were there to help.

I think it was a very good experience for both sides. And I think, particularly at the young officer level, the Japanese and American military who were working together for over a month in some very austere conditions really bonded. In 20 years, these American and Japanese soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines are going to be the military leaders on both sides. They will have had this bonding experience of having been in a crisis together and working together to overcome that crisis. So while this disaster was a tragedy, I think the outcome was a huge plus for our alliance.

Riley Walters:

Do you think that the U.S. humanitarian response helped bring our two countries closer together?

Ambassador Zumwalt:

The Japanese public, seeing the U.S. response, really helped solidify in their mind that this is a true alliance. We were both sides contributing to each other. And I’ll give you one or two examples.

One is a friend of mine. About two months after 3/11, he said to me, “you know, this was the worst tragedy to strike Japan since 1945.” But then, after a pause, he added, “but this time, we had friends.” And that comment really struck me. He recognized that his American friends were willing to help and he obviously appreciated that.
It does take work. You know, the United States brought in many experts, including nuclear physicists, radiation health experts, and communications experts. But at the embassy we also had one big asset, which is we had the relationships with the Japanese government counterparts. They knew us and those communications channels were so important.

The communication between Japan and the United States. It's critical. And that was the kind of expertise we at the embassy brought to the table. We knew how to talk to the right people in Japan and to listen to what they have to say. I was very pleased with the teamwork, and the professionalism and the mutual respect that these various government agencies showed and I thought it really showcased the U.S. government at its finest hour.

Riley Walters:

The world is currently recovering from another crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic. Do you think there are lessons to learn from the 3/11 crisis?

Ambassador Zumwalt:

I think there were lessons that I learned from 3/11. Whether they were learned for our COVID response or not, I'll leave to others to decide.

The first one is to be prepared. As an example, I mentioned to you that it was impossible for a week to get bottled water. People were concerned that tap water was unsafe to drink and bought up all the supplies of bottled tea and so forth. So our embassy staff became concerned whether we were going to have adequate supplies of water. Well, the embassy had stockpiled supplies of drinking water for an emergency, and we had stockpiled Meals Ready to Eat.

We had prepared. We didn't know there was going to be a triple disaster on March 11. But we knew that there was a chance of a major earthquake that would interfere with our supply chain. And so we needed to stockpile essential items, including medical supplies, drinking water, and food, to be self-sufficient for a certain period. Preparation is important.

The second lesson that's really important is communication. And the importance of communication cannot be overemphasized. We learned one of our most precious, precious assets for communication was our credibility. If we said something and were proven wrong, we would lose people's trust. It's really hard to win that back. So you we needed to husband our credibility by makin truthful statement and acknowledging what we did not know. The second important communications tool is consistency. If you send out mixed messages, people hear the messages they want to hear. So we needed to be very consistent in our messaging.

Another lesson that was really important, I think, is that first responders are themselves the victims of a disaster. For example, the American Embassy employees that I was sending out to help other Americans, themselves had families and kids that weren't sleeping at night, because they were frightened about the earthquakes. So taking care for the mental health of the first responders is important. We were very fortunate that our State Department regional psychiatrist was based in Tokyo to help our staff with stress management.

Another lesson was to listen to the experts and follow their advice. For example, when we brought in the NRC engineers, and I accompanied them to the Japanese government offices, where we got a
briefing from the plant operators. There, they engaged in a technical discussion about various things which I didn't understand because I'm not a nuclear engineer. When we left, my question to them was, what do I need to do with our staff? Do we need to recommend that they begin evacuation? They looked at me and said, “Oh, no, that's not our recommendation.” So I took that to heart. You know, they're the expert. We brought them in to help us. So now we need to listen to and follow their advice.

So those were the lessons that I learned from this tragedy. I'll leave it to your judgment as to how relevant they are now.

Riley Walters:
Do you have any final thoughts? Perhaps on ways to maintain a strong U.S.-Japan relationship?

Ambassador Zumwalt:

The U.S. and Japan, need to invest in our strong relationship by investing in our youth. Programs like youth exchanges are essential.

For example, there was one U.S. NGO that sends young Americans to disaster hit regions to help with disaster recovery. One group of 25 or so young Americans went to a small town in Northeastern Japan. Many of the Japanese there were somewhat suspicious about the motives of these young Americans who had come to help. But one of the local politicians was once an exchange student to the U.S. and he knew well about the American spirit of volunteerism. And so he convinced a few people to let these Americans help. As they started working clearing out rubble and clearing streets from debris. Seeing this hard work, others in the village began to realize these young people were here to help.

Going forward, if we want a strong relationship, and I certainly do and I know you do, I think investing in young Americans is important. This means helping American kids study Japanese. It means helping finance study abroad, which can be very expensive. It means hosting Japanese exchange students who come to the U.S. And helping with sister-city programs. There are any number of ways which we can contribute to building that base of the people-to-people ties that forms the bedrock of our relationship.

I think the U.S. was really able to help Japan in this crisis because of our long and deep relationship but we can’t take that relationship for granted. We have to keep investing in our future. And hopefully we can make our future relationship even stronger through these youth initiatives.