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Rubble, Radiation and Robots

Jennifer Robertson

TOKYO, June 28, 2011—Not an hour goes by without scenes of the tsunami-ravaged northeast (Tohoku) coast reminding television viewers in Japan of the excruciatingly slow pace of cleanup and recovery. The daily features of gritty survival stories reinforce the stereotype of provincial northeasterners as living repositories of such vaunted “traditional Japanese” values as resolution and perseverance (*gaman*) and “go for it” (*ganbare*) or “let’s get with it” (*ganbarō*) spirit. But without long-term, tangible assistance from the state the celebration of these values by the mainstream media seems disingenuous. Acting with selfless courage during a natural disaster is praiseworthy, but to speak of the virtues of perseverance in the face of the incompetence and indifference of government and industry officials only adds insult to injury.

That the state has co-opted for its own benefit the *ganbare* spirit of the northeasterners, instructing its consular offices abroad to sponsor posters on the theme of “Ganbare Nippon”, seems especially egregious. Such themes are notably useless to the tens of thousands of disaster victims who have received

but a fraction of the billions of dollars donated in good faith to the Japanese Red Cross and other NGOs. More than 100,000 survivors are still living behind cardboard walls in sweltering gymnasiums without wholesome food or adequate facilities. The Japanese and foreign celebrities who have provided much needed amusement to the stranded evacuees deserve respect, but they have not (yet) used their stardom to protest the sluggish pace of recovery efforts. The Japanese celebs who grew up in the northeast tearfully beseech viewers not to abandon the people of Tohoku. When will they beseech their government to behave responsibly?

That would be none too soon, for northeast coastal towns remain piled high in toxic debris because of a pathological lack of centralized leadership on the part of politicians and bureaucrats who are consumed with the dithering and bickering of party politics as usual. Has nothing been learned since 1995, when the Hanshin (Kobe) earthquake vividly exposed the state’s shocking lack of disaster preparedness? One must tune out the mainstream media and tune into the blogs, and especially to Twitter Japan, to find voices offering damning criticisms such as this: “If the multiple disasters had struck Osaka or Tokyo

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Kyoshi Ota/Getty Images

instead, the mess would have been cleaned up within a month.”

As if their lives were not already stressful enough, the people of Tohoku have had to take up the slack themselves. They have begun to reconstruct their homes and livelihoods, one piece of debris, one shovel of sludge, at a time. Those who can afford to pool their money can rent large-scale equipment to move their fishing boats back into the water and to stack all the tsunami-battered cars somewhere out of the way. The less affluent benefited in the early months from the generosity of youthful volunteers, several hundred of whom were exposed to asbestos and dioxin-laced rubble and injured by sharp debris, due in some cases to scanty training and protection. The mass media have played up their heartwarming valor rather than the threat that the smelly, rotting wreckage, swarming with flies, poses to everyone’s health.

With the number of unpaid volunteers now dwindling, the state and NGOs made arrangements in late June to pay rescue and reconstruction workers minimal daily wages averaging \$60. The money comes from new donations and endowments from other private funds. The disaster’s three-month anniversary focused on coming to terms with the staggering loss of



Tomohiro Ohsumi/Blomberg

Top, local fishermen clear debris in Minamisanniku, Miyagi, Japan.

Above, a worker undergoes a screening test for possible nuclear radiation outside TEPCO’s Fukushima Dai-Ichi nuclear power station.

23,000 lives. The four-month anniversary will surely highlight the emergence of a grassroots populism, for Japan’s northeasterners have come to realize that waiting for the state to follow through is as futile as waiting for Godot, which just happens to be the drama currently playing at the New National Theater in Tokyo.

Meanwhile, further south, along the irradiated coast of Fukushima prefecture, officials are uprooting grass and overturning soil in schoolyards in a naive and futile effort to make the outdoors “safer” for young children, who are

especially susceptible to radiation poisoning. The state has distributed Geiger counters to families living just outside the evacuation zone whose children attend public schools. These are areas where radiation “hot spots” come and go, depending on weather patterns. But since there are still no centrally coordinated efforts to measure shifting radiation levels in more than a few key sites, it is up to residents and conscientious scientists, such as those affiliated with the Citizens’ Nuclear Information Center, to gauge the degree of danger. No one has said more than a word or two about the harm posed to the region’s abundant wildlife.

Only scanty information is available, as well, about the status of the damaged reactor in the tsunami-engulfed town of Onagawa in Miyagi prefecture. The Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) has consistently massaged the truth about the meltdown and the amounts and types of radiation that continue to spew from its gutted reactors, trapping people in Fukushima and beyond between an invisible hammer of cesium-137 isotope and an anvil of iodine-131 isotope. There is no need for worry, though, says *Aera*, a popular news magazine; it reports with confidence that two bowls of miso soup a day are sufficient protection from radiation poisoning.

Because I conduct anthropological research on the Japanese robotics industry, colleagues have asked me why no Japanese robots have been deployed in rescue operations or used to survey the damaged reactors. They no doubt imagine that bipedal robots should be mopping up radioactive waste—images straight out of science fiction *anime*. The reality is that Honda’s celebrated Asimo and its bicycle-riding, violin-playing companion bots are very fragile platforms for designing sophisticated mechanisms and software systems. This is only a partial answer, however; the unasked question is, if not robots, then who or what is cleaning up the lethal mess at Fukushima, where everything is leaking except accurate information?

The *New York Times*, whose insightful reports of the March 11 crisis have circulated widely on Japanese blogs, recently sought an answer to this question. A June 25 article, “‘Safety Myth’ Left Japan Ripe for Nuclear

Crisis”, quotes a Japanese roboticist who complains that the nuclear industry redirected funding for emergency robots to an advertising campaign promoting the safety of atomic power. This explanation, though expedient, is deeply misleading.

It is true that robots are sophisticated, expensive and, for the most part, easily broken machines. It is reasonable not to risk their destruction in the corrosive sludge of the badly damaged Fukushima reactors. What none of this tells readers is that 90 percent of the Fukushima workforce are day laborers, as they were even before construction on the plant was completed. Many of these are elderly men, and many are originally from Tohoku, having been recruited by *yakuza* (Japanese mafia) brokers and through Twitter ads from the flophouse districts of Tokyo, Yokohama and Osaka. Their human bodies are both more versatile (they can be selectively deployed in the manner of Japan’s famous “just in time” manufacturing system) and much less expensive than robots.

The investigative journalist Horie Kunio first exposed the shameful treatment of these contract workers in a 1979 book titled *Genbatsu Jipushii* (“Nuclear Gypsies”). Forty years later, the powerful nuclear industry still regards them as dispensable and, like radiation itself, conveniently invisible. While TEPCO operates in secrecy, none of this information is secret. Mainstream media in Japan have nevertheless been reluctant to connect the dots, and the government, it nearly goes without saying, has done nothing at all.

Whereas most Japanese rescue and service robots were kept safely within their laboratories, iRobot, an American company, was invited to Fukushima in the early weeks of the disaster by Japan’s Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to deploy within the damaged reactors their Packbot and Warrior models used in Iraq and Afghanistan. Speculation is rife as to whether the SDF was first presented with this option by their American counterparts when they launched Operation Tomodachi (Friend) on March 12 to provide humanitarian assistance. In any event, the operation has helped to smooth the recently rocky negotiations involving the status of American bases on Japanese soil.

Perhaps to save face, or to benefit equally from the opportunity to test Japanese robots in

a real-time nuclear meltdown, Quince, a compact, tractor-like rescue robot developed jointly by Tohoku University and Chiba University of Technology, was briefly showcased at the Fukushima reactor in early June. Nevertheless, the iRobot brigade has overshadowed Japan's impressive personal robots since the March 11 events. Japan's robot industry has not been idle, however. Honda's Asimo is among the celebrity performers offering evacuees a few hours of playful distraction from the anxious tedium of their lives in limbo. And the enterprising roboticist Shibata Takanori has promoted the therapeutic value of Paro, a robotic harbor seal, in alleviating symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder that are widespread among tsunami survivors and evacuees. But for the majority of northeasterners there are no robots to help them with daily tasks.

Having begun by introducing several Japanese words beginning with “g”, let me close with another: *gaiatsu*. *Gaiatsu* translates as outside pressure, usually in reference to foreign governments. Most Japanese view the Tohoku disaster as the country's biggest catastrophe since the atomic bombings of August 1945. On March 11, 2011, the agent of *gaiatsu* was plate tectonics and not the United States. The smashed and splintered cities of the tsunami-ravaged northeast coast are often compared to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, whose residents, everyone knows, suffered gruesome burns and injuries. In contrast, photos of the workers known to have been hurt by either or both the explosion and radioactive materials at Fukushima have not been released and information on the nature of their injuries remains vague. Moreover, because the radiation leaking nonstop from the crippled Fukushima reactors is invisible to the naked eye, and because official information is fuzzy about the maximum acceptable dosage of radiation, many Japanese—with the notable exception of mothers with young children and antinuclear activists—remain shockingly cavalier about the long-term dangers of ionizing radiation. Some seem to actually believe in the protective powers of *miso shiru*.

Despite being the only country to have experienced two atomic bombings and their horrific aftermath, Japan embraced nuclear power as an

expedient means to fuel its postwar reconstruction. Back in the heady 1980s, when the economy was flourishing and sushi wrapped in gold-leaf was the rage, Prime Minister Nakasone declared that Japan had entered a “post-postwar era”, an expression echoed in 2008 to mark a new age of friendship between Japan and China. Plate tectonics, which on March 11, 2011, unleashed the largest earthquake ever recorded followed by a tsunami that topped a hundred feet in some areas, has dramatically propelled Japan into yet another new era: that of post-disaster. Two-thirds of the country's 54 nuclear reactors are now shut down, and the myth of nuclear safety lies fractured alongside the Fukushima and Onagawa plants. As of July 1, households and businesses in prefectures supplied by Tokyo and Tohoku electric companies must cut their daily consumption of electricity by 15 percent. The rest of the country has been admonished to adopt the same policy on a voluntary basis in the face of a summer season predicted to be hotter and more humid than last year's. Television programs on heat-stroke and on strategies for keeping cool and hydrated are becoming as ubiquitous as the accounts of the growing mountains of debris in the northeast and the plight of evacuees coping with chronic stress and anxiety.

On June 22, an editorial in the center-left newspaper *Asahi Shinbun* bore the headline, “The way forward for Japan may only be found by going back.” The nostalgic, inward-looking images invoked in the editorial were of a “tradition” of resolving (*gaman*) to make do with less, a noble aspiration perhaps, when “less” is merely a lifestyle option exercised by affluent citizens. But for millions of Japanese living along the northeast coast, the disaster of March 11 cut off both the way back *and* the way forward. Contrary to the editorial, the imagination of post-disaster Japan must be as radical and unprecedented as the outside forces (*gaiatsu*) that, within a thirty-minute span one afternoon in March, turned the Tohoku coast into a sea of radioactive rubble. Just as Facebook amplified revolutionary fervor in the Middle East, Twitter Japan has the potential to become a “domestic *gaiatsu*”, and to generate a wave of citizen activism that dislodges a regime as inert as the country's rescue robots. 🌐