

Letters from Overseas

David and Zenora Rackham Write from Japan

Sunday Morning, March 13
9:30 a.m. JST

Thank you very much indeed for your kindness and concern. Yes, there was a lot of shaking (an undulating movement of the earth) here in Tokyo and on the International Christian University (ICU) campus. We ran out of the house to the yard in front when the quake struck at 2:46 p.m. and found it hard to stand (had just returned from the office, much earlier than I usually do). It seemed to go on for a long time. It was as if we were on a ship at sea caught in a substantial swell. A lot of things tumbled off shelves in our campus house. We understand there has been some damage to some of the campus buildings, but whether that damage is structurally strategic or not remains to be seen.

In the meantime, we are not allowed to enter the buildings. I suspect my office may be in a shambles. We are safe here with all our emergency supplies. The aftershocks continue, the latest one we felt here less than an hour ago. Some of the aftershocks seem to have their epicentres located inland but the majority are still out to sea. Who knows what destabilization of fault lines had occurred as a result of the 8.9 magnitude quake on Friday afternoon. The major fault line associated with the "predicted" Tokyo "big one" is located off Shizuoka to the south of us here. It was that fault line that shifted dramatically in 1923, leading to the death of 140,000 people in the Tokyo region.

Although the shaking was quite severe in the Tokyo region, there was surprisingly little damage, although big skyscrapers swayed dramatically according to reports. Many train services were stopped with the result that many people had to spend Friday night in downtown Tokyo or try to walk home. One of our friends and colleagues here at ICU was in Shinjuku (one of the major areas in Tokyo). In the end he walked five hours to get back to ICU. We continue to wait to see how things unfold. What you are seeing on television is largely in the Sendai region and the adjacent coastline Pacific regions, and it is indeed horrific.

There is an ongoing crisis at the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant to the northeast of Tokyo with reports that a second reactor at that facility is now in trouble. We don't know what impact there will be on the electricity supply nationwide or on fuel, food, and water supplies. We hope for the best while wanting to weep for those many poor souls who lost their lives, or if they survived the onslaught of the earthquake and the tsunami, lost all their worldly possessions to the raging, implacable waters.

What you are seeing on television is not what we are experiencing here on the western side of Tokyo. Certainly horrific things have happened and are happening in the Sendai region and along the adjacent coasts northeast of us here in Tokyo. We are carrying on more or less as usual but don't know what will happen in the next few days as the aftershocks continue.

March 13, 2011
11:45 a.m. JST

It's a terrible situation in the Sendai region and along the Pacific Coast from there, north and south. However, we are probably in one of the safest places you can be. There are many open spaces on the campus. Our university house is a single-storey dwelling, as you know. In fact, the campus is an evacuation area in case of an emergency. From the television reports, you would think that all of Japan has been devastated by the earthquake and subsequent tsunami, but that is not the case, although there will be various implications for the country as a whole in a variety of areas as the cost of recovery will be very high, not to mention the psychological costs incurred by traumatized people.

Tuesday night, March 15

Many thanks for your kindness and concern.

It's very hard to know what is really happening at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Plant. All four reactors at that plant have malfunctioned to varying degrees and are out of commission, likely permanently, as saltwater has been dumped into them to try to cool them down. Explosions have blown off the outer concrete containing structures on at least two of the reactors, possibly more. Due to failures in the cooling system, temperatures have risen, leading to a pressure build-up in the outer containing chambers, as I understand it. At certain times today there were reports of significant radioactivity beyond the immediate vicinity of the reactor complex and readings were even being given for Tokyo.

However, they claimed that even if radiation levels were elevated somewhat, there was no threat to human health. Given certain cultural prerogatives and the nature of the Japanese language itself, there is a lot of talk of an indirect nature. If one is accustomed to straightforward coherent reports in the Western tradition, then you need to reconcile yourself to the fact that the style of communication here is much more indirect, more concerned with maintaining a surface calm and the appearance of consensus. It seems that a lot of people don't quite trust the power company due to a series of scandals a few years ago in regard to plant safety issues.

We have no plans to "evacuate" the campus. It is probably one of the safest places to be in the Tokyo Metropolitan area. We have not lost electricity so far despite planned rolling blackouts that were supposed to affect us in this region. A lot of confusion has been caused for individuals and organizations alike (e.g., transportation companies) as scheduled blackouts have not been implemented in some areas despite earlier notices to the contrary. The Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) says that with various nuclear reactors out of service, they are 10,000,000 KW short of being able to meet regular peak demand. There are reports



of various commodities such as food and gasoline being in short supply in some areas of Tokyo, as people try to prepare for the worst.

We have to make a trip to the Chinese Embassy in downtown Tokyo to pick up Zenora's passport with a tourist visa for China, something we were supposed to do on Monday, March 14. However, Monday was very confusing with many train services running at half of their usual capacity, hence severely overcrowded carriages. Depending on circumstances, we may try to get down to the Chinese Embassy Wednesday morning and then scoot out here again as soon as possible. Although I have Zenora's passport number, she feels uncomfortable being without it.

With all best wishes from Tokyo and God bless!

David & Zenora

David and Zenora Rackham are United Church of Canada overseas personnel serving with United Church of Christ in Japan. The work of overseas personnel is made possible through your gifts to the Mission and Service Fund of The United Church of Canada.

