

Statement by Parliamentary Secretary Mitsunori Okamoto of Japan at the
OECD Social Policy Ministerial Meeting

3 May 2011

Introduction

I would like to speak on the Great East-Japan Earthquake which hit Japan on March 11th this year.

Before all else, I would like to express my sincere gratitude, on behalf of the Minister of Health, Labour and Welfare, Mr. Hosokawa, for the expressions of sympathy and support conveyed to my country from more than 140 states and regions and nearly 40 international agencies, as well as from ordinary people all over the world following the earthquake.

At the same time, Japan, as a member of the international community, apologizes for the large releases of radioactive material into the air and sea that resulted from the nuclear power plant accident—an event that was attributable to the tsunami—.

Prime Minister Kan recently issued a message under the title “Kizuna – The Bonds of Friendship” in response to this support, in which he says: “There is no doubt that Japan will recover, become vibrant again, and become an even more marvelous country. In living up to the cordial encouragement and solidarity extended to us by the international community, I consider walking down the road to such a rebirth to be incumbent upon us, and the best way for Japan to reciprocate your kind concern. I am also determined that Japan will certainly repay, through our contributions to the international community, the cordial assistance we have received from around the world.”

Once again, on behalf of the Japanese people, I would like to express my heart-felt gratitude for so much warm support received from people all over the world.

State of damage

The magnitude 9 earthquake that rocked Japan on March 11th, combined with the ensuing tsunami and nuclear power plant accidents, was the worst disaster to strike this country on record. As of April 25th, more than 26,000 people are dead or missing, with more than 130,000 still homeless. In addition, more than 68,000 houses were fully destroyed, more than 25,000 half-destroyed and more than 214,000 partially destroyed. It is estimated that the damage caused directly by the earthquake and tsunami alone could cost as much as 25 trillion yen.

The total amount of radioactive substances leaked from the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant accidents reached an estimated maximum of 0.63 million terabecquerels as of April 12th, with leaks of 4,700 terabecquerels of highly-contaminated water having occurred as of April 21st. Although the control rods operated normally and operational shutdown was successfully achieved, Japan is sorry that large amounts of radioactive material were released into the air and sea when cooling functions were lost due to the tsunami. We are now trying hard to stabilise the situation as quickly as possible. We would be very grateful if the world could continue to offer us its support and cooperation.

Support for victims

The ultimate goal of social policy is to protect people's lives. Recognising this, we have taken the following initial responses to the crisis brought by this natural disaster: improve medical and mental health care schemes; ensure budgets for the building of temporary housing to enable the shift from shelters to normal life; try to understand the needs of sufferers and provide the necessary services promptly and comprehensively based on the importance of care for vulnerable groups such as children, the elderly and the disabled.

In the medium-term, we are supporting the creation of industries and jobs and the recovery of communities, aiming to reconstruct the lives of those who have suffered and the regions in which they live.

Every aspect of Japan's social security system—including medical care, nursing care, and employment—is being put to the test. All government organizations concerned recognize the challenges that this situation presents and are doing their utmost to meet them.

Hereafter, we will pursue the development of our social security system, addressing structural problems such as an aging society and with due consideration for OECD recommendations on fiscal consolidation.

Response to the nuclear power plant accidents

The Japanese government is taking every possible measure in response to the accident at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant. In terms of action taken by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, for example, we have set provisional limits under the Food Sanitation Act for radioactive substances in foods. For foods that exceed these limits, we are taking actions such as restricting shipments and consumption.

Concerning radioactive substances in the water supply, meanwhile, we are continuing to monitor the situation in surrounding prefectures and advising the public to avoid drinking tap water that exceeds index values. We have set particularly stringent index values for consumption by infants.

From the perspective of occupational safety and health management, we are conducting thorough health check-ups on workers engaged in dealing with the accident on-site and managing the limit of their exposure level. For ordinary citizens, we are conducting health assessments in shelters and public health centres, and monitoring the gardens of schools and childcare centres to confirm their safety.

Relationship with the international community

Some countries and regions have adopted measures to strengthen regulation, such as carrying out radiation tests. However, as explained above, we are striving to ensure the safe distribution of foods. Likewise, the safety of Japan's prescription drugs and other industrial products is entirely assured

because their raw materials, as well as the water and other products used in their manufacture, all undergo a full screening process. We will continue to provide food and industrial products to the world, having assured their safety. Thus, we hope everyone will continue to consume Japanese products without any anxiety.

We will strive to provide information regarding the nuclear power plant accident promptly and accurately. The Japanese people are reacting coolly and rationally to the crisis. Indeed, residents of unaffected regions, including those living in Japan's capital of Tokyo, are returning to their normal routines as they continue to address the needs of the disaster-stricken areas. I would therefore like to request that all parties concerned adopt a calm response based on scientific fact.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude by expressing my sincere gratitude to the OECD Secretariat for all the work they have done to successfully convene this conference.