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OP-ED

# Surviving the worst earthquake in living memory



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Photo: AFP  
**Ashraf ud Doula**

Returning to Tokyo after nearly a year upon conclusion of my almost four-year stint as Bangladesh Ambassador to Japan, in the last week of the wintry month of February, naturally made me feel very nostalgic.

The fateful day of March 11 broke at dawn with bright sunshine. It was a beautiful day with a clear blue sky and without any sign of bad weather, let alone a catastrophe.

It was about 2.45pm. We had already ordered some food and no sooner were the dishes placed before us, a trembling jolt threw me off from the chair, the dishes flew several meters away and the whole building started shaking vigorously, swinging from one side to another. The chandeliers were moving from one side to the other dangerously. The Japanese people, who have learned the drill of what to do during an earthquake from their birth, were quick to run for cover.

But how could you run? The world was about to fall apart, you couldn't even stand on your two feet! The furniture was hurtling around dangerously. Women and children were crying unstoppably. My friend asked me to take cover under the table, which I did immediately. I was totally in a state of shock without knowing what to say or do. Never had I faced such a situation. Thousands of thoughts crossed my mind. Was I going to die? The building started shaking even more violently. I saw the faces of my wife, my children and my grandsons -- will I not see them again? Is this my last day on earth? I thought of my grand children, my son and his wife. Where are they? Are they safe? What has happened to them? The building was shaking again.

When I was in Tokyo from 2006-2010, I had experienced several jolts and tremors, but none of such cataclysmic proportion. I was trying to contact my son, his wife and also my host on my cell phone but the telephone network was totally jammed. All of a sudden, breaking the silence, my cell phone rang as if bringing a message of hope and good luck. It was Jasmine, my wife. I shouted where the hell you are calling from? There is an earthquake going on and I am under a table in a restaurant. She replied that she saw the news on the TV and called me right away. I told her I was OK for now and she should try to reach Razin and his family. It was quite a miracle that though we couldn't connect with any phone internally in Japan, Jasmine, sitting in Dhaka, thousands of miles away, was able to reach us all. She kind of became a communication provider for us for the next two days. It must have been several minutes before we could be rescued from the building by the volunteers who had already gone into action.



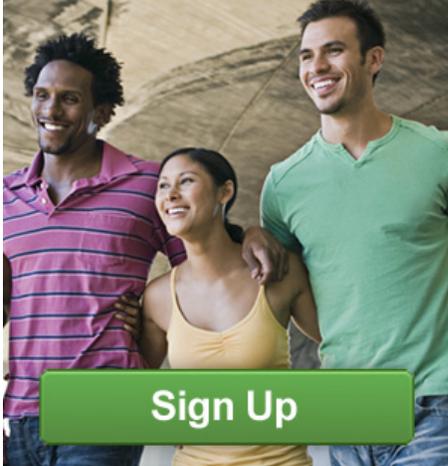
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As we came out I felt a great sense of relief -- I was not going to die, yet. I saw Kato san, who had brought me to the restaurant, waiting for me. Without emotion he said: "Sir, I was very worried about you." I told him let's go back, hurriedly bidding farewell to my friends. On the way back I was astounded to see hundreds of people walking in different directions for there were no trains or buses. But there was no chaos or confusion or commotion. Everybody knew their drill. I was wondering how people who came from far away would make it back to their homes.

I asked Kato san, who was driving with lot of caution and care, about his observation of the earthquake. As we were driving there were few more jolts and we felt that the car might topple over. Kato san said he had never experienced an earthquake of such a huge magnitude. I asked him to turn on the car radio and it announced that the quake was of the magnitude of 8.8, on the Richter scale, which was the strongest ever earthquake recorded in Japan. The Kobe earthquake of 1995 was of the level of 7.8. Next day, the intensity of the earthquake was revised to the level of 9 -- the fifth strongest in history.

We came back home. Jasmine had called again and I asked her to advise Razin to come to me as it would be extremely difficult for him to go back to Kanagawa. So Razin had to walk about 12 miles to join me at the Pakistan ambassador's residence. He told me that he was having a business meeting at the 28th floor cafe of the Shangri-La Hotel when the earthquake struck. They had to run down the stairs while it was still shaking. As the night rolled on, and the world kept on shaking from side to side unabated, the true horror started unfolding gradually.

The earthquake was followed by a devastating ten-meter high tsunami moving at 500km an hour. The wave crashed into three North Eastern provinces of Japan and destroyed everything that came in its way. The news of death and destruction started pouring in, while the powerful aftershocks continued to rattle the country every now and then. At one count, more than 300 aftershocks of the level of 6-7 struck up until the night of March 15. Adding to the woes, two nuclear reactors in Fukushima province exploded.

To many Japanese, this posed the greatest danger with is associated health risk as, according to them, they were prepared to confront the aftermath of an earthquake but not the consequences of a nuclear explosion. There were reports of food shortages and scarcity of essential items. Water was most scarce and fuel was rationed.

The day after the earthquake I went to my son's place. A friend of mine who lived nearby came to see. She brought with her four half liter bottles of water. As she placed them down on the table she remarked: "I thought they would be the most precious gift at this moment." I had no words to appreciate the gesture and thought to myself that it was only in Japanese minds that such an idea could occur.

The calamity has not only cost the country enormously in terms of human lives, the economy has also taken a huge battering, at a time when Japan is reeling from various economic ills. It is believed that by the time the full count has been made, the death toll could be well over 10,000, with trillions of dollars of property destroyed. The preliminary estimates suggest that more than 6% of GDP has been lost. But what about the long term impact both nationally and globally?

In spite of the immediate impact that affected the country as well as the world there is cautious hope that given the Japanese history and track record of rising from the ashes, once again the devastation will motivate the nation to emerge like a Phoenix from the debris of the catastrophe. The day after the earthquake, Prime Minister Naoto Kan said: "When we faced together an unprecedented challenge, and while the immediate priority would be saving lives, the nation could one day look back at this time as a moment that helped create a new Japan." An article in the March 15 issue of International Herald Tribune, headlined, "Summoning the spirit of Japan" by Nasrine Azimi, a senior advisor at the UN Institute for training and research, echoing the hope of the Japanese prime minister exudes optimism that it might not be long before Japan, with all its creativity, harmony, technology and hard work, reemerges as a new and powerful nation. A modicum of cooperation was already palpable in the political circle as there appeared to be some restraint in heating up the political temperature.

I stuck out the whole time switching between Kanagawa and Tokyo, all the while braving one aftershock after another. Even today (March 16), as I was preparing to catch my flight at 6.30 in the morning there were few tremors, including one just before I boarded the plane -- what a warm send off, I murmured to myself.

As I tried to sleep I was troubled with millions of questions coming to my mind -- the most critical of all: what would happen if an earthquake of such a magnitude ever struck Bangladesh, since there was already apprehension that Bangladesh, especially Dhaka city, lies on a major fault line? A dispassionate analysis will reveal that the majority of the damage in Japan has been caused by the tsunami and not by the earthquake, though its ferocity was very high.

Since 1995, Japan has ensured that all the new buildings strictly adhered to the building codes including the earthquake protection while the old ones were retrofitted with equally strong measures. These were on the top of regular drills conducted by the Tokyo Metropolitan Council to prepare the people for such an eventuality. Thus, a great many lives were saved. In the case of tsunami however, though Japan had adequate measures to confront such calamities, with miles of sea walls at places 12 meter high, the fury and rage of nature proved to be too powerful to be overcome by man.

I think it is high time that we in Bangladesh pay some real attention to the gravity of the situation before it is too late. The authorities first and foremost must distribute a handbook with detailed instructions as to what to do when an earthquake strikes. The City Corporation should also conduct life saving drills on what to do during an earthquake. We can seek Japanese help in this regard. The government can issue earthquake protection kits at a subsidised rate. And, finally a building code should be put in place to be strictly adhered to by all.

I think it is also pertinent to review our decision to build nuclear plants, given that we are a densely populated country and any nuclear accident will wreak havoc on us. So we should be absolutely zero tolerant on safety issues if after all we decide to go ahead with the plan.

As I met many of my friends -- Japanese, foreigners and Bangladeshis -- I was confronted by everyone with one question: "Why are you doing this to Dr Yunus?" I think it is not only hurting our image as a nation, it is also hurting the image of the government.

**The writer is a former Secretary and an Ambassador.**

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