



LEARNING INITIATIVE

March 11, 2011: Namie Township

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March 11, 2011: Namie Township (A)

“Well, it’s a standard township hall, as seen everywhere in Japan, most of which function by precedent and sectionalism.”—Mr. Toru Kinoshita, Chief Officer, Namie Township Office.

Namie Township of Fukushima Prefecture is Toru’s hometown. After graduating from a local high school, he studied at Fukushima University. He was raised in a family of four, with a hardworking office worker father, a housewife mother, and a responsible elder sister. They were all believers in hard work, and Toru was a high-performing student. His high school days were fruitful; he and his classmates enjoyed various extracurricular activities related to school, and he studied diligently for the examination to enter university. Those days brought pleasant memories and were highly enjoyable. Many of his friends left home for colleges in Tokyo and Sendai, but Toru chose to study in Fukushima.

University Years

Entering his first choice of university, Toru joined the university’s tennis team and practiced hard to win tennis matches. Although he was not an elite tennis player at the national level, he achieved relatively good scores, such as being ranked eighth in Fukushima Prefecture. He was a person of few words; yet his sincere efforts and care for the younger members made him a popular team leader. He was selected for the university team when he was a junior student. Toru also attended university classes regularly, and completed almost all the requirements for graduation by the end of his junior year.

In the summer when he became the team leader, he concentrated on daily practice to win an annual tennis match against a private university in Chiba. There, he met his old friends, Mr. Yoichiro Yoshida and Mr. Kengo Yamaguchi, both of whom had been his high school classmates. They met at their meeting spot, a ticket gate of Shinjuku Station in Tokyo. Yoichiro appeared wearing a “recruitment” suit. “It’s recruitment time. I’m just back from an alumni visit at a security company.”

They enjoyed a reunion meeting at a noisy Japanese-style pub, *Izakaya*, where both Yoichiro and Kengo talked about how difficult and how important early job

hunting was in Tokyo, referring to some well-known companies of which Toru had often heard on TV. They also talked about their good old days; yet Toru felt that the current priority for Yoichiro and Kengo was their search for jobs.

Having had a good time with the old familiar faces, Toru boarded a night bus to return to Fukushima. He watched a forest of neon from the bus window and many straphangers on a train who looked tired. Having closed his eyes, he muttered to himself, “I can’t do this Tokyo life,” and fell asleep in a narrow bus seat.

In October, when the university fall semester began, Toru was involved in a group research project on “community development” with his academic advisor. For this project, he visited a variety of towns and villages in Fukushima, and started to feel a strong attachment to his hometown of Namie, where he wished to stay.

One day in his tennis clubroom, Toru heard that a fellow player went to the university library every day to study for the local government examination. That was the first time he had considered the option of working as a local government official. He learned that the following June was the next opportunity to take the examination. Because he already had sufficient credits in order to graduate, he thought he could concentrate on fully preparing for the examination. As a result, he passed the examination and was assigned to Namie Township Office. His parents looked happy, and for the first time, he felt that he might be a dutiful son.

Starting Work in the Hometown

Toru was first assigned to work in the Revenue Division, and later to the Divisions of Health Insurance, Industry Promotion, and Resident Livelihood. In the Division of Resident Livelihood, he was in charge of fire and disaster prevention and worked with local people in this field.

He recalled, “In the early days I was busy doing desk work in the township hall. However, later I increasingly communicated with the local people. I frequently recalled my original determination—“I want to work for my hometown.” I felt that I worked with the residents of our hometown. Having said that, however, I listened to many requests and complaints from local residents, and I struggled to coordinate their demands with the township office. But I wished to make visible contributions to my hometown.”

Through this process of building trust with local people, Toru felt more confidence in working as a township official.

As a training exercise, he sometimes contacted other township officials and prefectural government officers. At a joint training workshop, an official from Minami Soma City asked him, “How are you doing in Namie Township? Namie people appear to have a strong affiliation with the town, and you township officials all have a strong sense of unity, don’t you?” Toru was a little surprised to hear this view from an officer working in a larger city. He replied frankly, “Administrative divisions are well arranged and managed in response to public needs; it’s a standard township office, as seen everywhere in Japan.”

Toru spent his regular life on everyday matters, but this was abruptly interrupted by an extraordinary experience on March 11, 2011, when he was 35 years old.

March 11, 2011: Namie Township (B)

In a booth of the main building of Namie Township Hall, Toru Kinoshita was preparing an agenda and information documents for the township assembly to be held on March 12. Expecting a short tea break at 3 p.m., he concentrated on computer work for almost two hours after lunch.

Suddenly and violently he was bounced and shaken at his desk. At 2.46 p.m. on March 11, 2011, the Great East Japan Earthquake—with a magnitude of 9 on the Richter scale—shook Japan.

Everything on the ground was shaken up and down for a long time. Toru could not stand or even move. His desk was fixed to the wall, but unfixed desks and furniture were moving around by 50–60 cm. Desk drawers fell out, and desks crashed into other desks and were overturned, spilling many documents. Many wall lockers also began to fall down. People screamed out, “Get away from the lockers!” “No way out,” Toru mumbled. “How long will this last?”

After a short break in the most destructive shaking, managerial officers, including the mayor and the vice-mayor, gathered in the mayor’s office, where executive meetings were regularly held.

The magnitude and damage of the great earthquake were reported over the community wireless system, TV, radio, and the Internet. Based on the township ordinance on disaster countermeasures, and because the quake registered an intensity of over 4 on the Japanese scale, Namie Township immediately established a Disaster Countermeasures Office. Community leaders, as well as representatives from the fire department and the police, met to discuss disaster responses. Following consultations at the meeting, various assignments were delegated to different divisions. Toru’s Division of Resident Livelihood was assigned to manage evacuation.

Without the composure of mind to listen to his boss, Mr. Kiyoshi Nomura, Toru confirmed evacuation methods and sites. However, he soon put down the prearranged contingency plan documents. Instead, he began to draw a handwritten map for evacuation, and rushed to Mr. Nomura’s desk.

Toru explained to him, “According to the existing contingency plan, every division is assigned to guide evacuees in the districts of Namie, Ikusebashi Ukedo, Ohori, Karino, and Tsushima, respectively. But because the plan does not assume that

our own division is assigned to all districts and not just one, we need to draw another map. Here is my own idea for a new evacuation map.” Listening to Toru’s explanation, Mr. Nomura examined the map and replied, “I understand. I’ll give out instructions based on this map.”

Soon a succession of residents came to the township hall for evacuation, and people became increasingly confused. Several officials explained the situation to town residents. Toru felt he needed to know the real situation in the township and he told Mr. Nomura, “I don’t think we can devise appropriate countermeasures by remaining here. We cannot understand what is going on from here. You should stay here, Mr. Nomura, but why don’t you allow me to look around the evacuation sites, so that we can understand the situation of the evacuees?”

“That’s right. Let us work in teams to find out the current situation. I’ll break the staff up into teams and let you know soon,” Mr. Nomura replied. Later, Mr. Nomura wrote a list of his divisional officers on a whiteboard in the meeting room, assigning them to three teams for three destinations. Toru looked at the board to confirm his assignment, but could not find his name on it.

“Mr. Nomura, I cannot find my name,” Toru asked. “You should stay here, because we don’t know what will happen next. Somebody who can issue the necessary instructions should remain here in the headquarters,” Mr. Nomura replied.

For Toru, it was an unacceptable option in this critical situation. He was deeply concerned about the confused evacuees who rushed into the township hall, and thought constantly about familiar faces wandering around in the street seeking an evacuation site, but he could do nothing but follow the instructions of his boss.

3.33 p.m.: A Tsunami Arrives

At 3.33 p.m. on March 11, just when the three teams were about to leave the Township Hall, the community wireless system announced, “A tsunami of over three meters in height has struck the coastal area.”

The news further escalated the confusion in the township hall. The fact-finding teams had to wait in the main building of the hall. Many more, frightened townspeople were crowding into the building. Along the lines suggested by the mayor, the first floor of the township hall was opened as an evacuation space for them. Mr.

Nomura instructed the divisional officers to put a blank strip of paper on the wall, to display the names of people present and destinations where they would be moved if necessary, as a safety confirmation system for disaster emergency communication.

March 11, 2011: Namie Township (C)

Toward evening, when Toru came down from the countermeasures office to the first floor for a safety confirmation meeting, he found that township officials were flooded with complaints from a large group of traumatized people he had never seen before. Townspeople were all reporting the difficulties caused by cold and darkness. The month of March in Fukushima and other areas of northeastern Japan is still in the severest period of winter. The bitterly cold and dark floor of the building fueled the fear of the evacuees affected by the catastrophe of the quake and tsunami.

While the light was on in the countermeasures office, which had an off-grid power generator, many other floors of the building were suffering blackouts. “Give us some heating,” or “We came here without a change of clothes so we need extra clothes,” people were saying. In response to these requests, blankets were provided from stockpiled relief supplies. However, there were too few reserves for such a large number of evacuees, so some town officials gave them their own jackets.

Amid this confusion and fear, a man from the town rushed into the building and collapsed, his voice pleading. “We are evacuating Namie Elementary School. Nobody from the township hall is there, and no information has been provided. People all look increasingly anxious. Come and help us immediately.”

Toru replied, “I understand the situation, but I am busy supporting the evacuees here. Let me check who is in charge of the area of Namie Elementary School.”

“How can you take your time?” the man shouted in fury. “Somebody needs to come right now. Nobody from the Township Office is there; that means no one was assigned. YOU should come.”

March 11, 2011: Namie Township (D)

Mr. Nomura's words echoed in Toru's mind. "You should stay here. Because we don't know what will happen next, somebody who can issue the necessary instructions should remain here." Seeing Toru's hesitancy, the man said in disgust, "Yeah, yeah, yeah. I can't stand it anymore," and he went to seek another official's assistance.

Toru staggered tiredly up the stairs to his office floor. Seated at his desk, he thought he would need a rest from work the next day. He spoke briefly with Mr. Kinoshita, interrupting his discussion with other divisional heads, and looked around for a place to have a catnap. In a conference room where his colleagues were having sleep breaks, Toru lined up unused chairs, on which he decided to take a nap. Lying down on the chairs, he realized he had eaten nothing since lunch, but he had lost his appetite and closed his eyes after gazing at the ceiling for a while.

March 12: Displacement

Toru could not sleep at all. When he closed his eyes, he saw the series of events that had occurred during the long day. In particular, the face of the angry man from Namie Elementary School came back to haunt him. Exhausted, he could not distinguish dreams from reality. Closing his weary eyes, he stayed there silently. After a while, Mr. Nomura's unbelievable words reached his ears, "Listen! The nuclear power plant might explode!"

Mr. Nomura, who had also been taking a nap in the township hall, was informed via a TV in the countermeasures office at 5:44 a.m. on March 12 that the national government had issued an evacuation order for residents within a 10-km radius of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. In response to the order, the Namie Township decided to relocate the functions of the Namie Township Office to the Tsushima Branch Office, located more than 20 km to the northwest of the nuclear plant, and to provide guidance to town residents regarding evacuation beyond the 10-km radius of the nuclear power plant.

For both Mr. Nomura and Toru, who were preoccupied with the earthquake and tsunami response, the news regarding the nuclear power plant came as a tremendous surprise.

In a dimly lit washroom early in the morning, Toru washed his face with liquid hand soap, and gargled quickly. He was again aware that he had eaten no food since lunch the previous day. He thought there would be emergency bottled water somewhere, yet he drank tap water from his wet hands.

Toru said to Mr. Nomura, “Let’s move anyway. No information has been provided about the current situation of the nuclear power plant, so I am not sure it is really safe beyond a 10-km radius of the plant. Isn’t there a contingency plan for a nuclear plant accident?”

Mr. Nomura replied, “Kinoshita, be that as it may, now that Karino Elementary School, 5 km from here has been designated the evacuation point for residents, can you make an evacuation map so that we can guide them safely? Also, summon all the available buses from all corners of the township immediately.”

“All right. I will do that immediately,” Toru replied. Toru went through the lists of bus companies and other companies that might own buses, and checked them one by one. In this emergency situation, he conducted a thorough search for all possible bus owners. Using the community wireless system, the announcement was made repeatedly to residents in the area who were “within a 10-km radius.” With the assistance of the fire and police departments, the announcement was made to ensure that every town resident was informed. The announcement was made repeatedly, until the last bus left: “For residents without any means of transport, please come to the township hall to board a bus.”

The town residents who had been evacuated the previous day were again forced to relocate to another site. The situation fueled their anxiety and prompted complaints, and the frustration and stress of the evacuees reached a peak. In a bus, Toru repeatedly heard many difficult questions, which nobody in the township could answer: “What’s going on?” and “What will happen next?” Finally, residents vented their anger on township officials, shouting abuse at them: “Why don’t YOU respond? Why?”

Because Toru was assigned to take charge of guiding people to Karino Elementary School, he had boarded the first bus leaving Namie Township. Residents and town officers moved in sequence to Karino Elementary School, and the overflow people were moved to Karino Community Center. Toru heard that township officials were making rice balls for evacuees at the community center, where he found his

colleague, Ms. Yoshiko Suzuki from the Revenue Division, and another five officials were preparing meals outdoors.

Toru asked, “Ms. Suzuki, are you all right?” Ms. Suzuki replied, “Mr. Kinoshita, I will be okay. I am not sure if all evacuees will get rice balls, but we will do our best to give them out to every evacuee.” “Many residents will arrive in groups. Please give the rice balls out at both the elementary school and the community center,” Toru requested.

Thinking of the evacuated residents who had not had hot food without rationing since the day after the catastrophe, Ms. Suzuki and the others were making rice balls with all their hearts, which made their hands red. Toru also guided residents from buses without a break, going back and forth between the two evacuation sites.

In the early evening, when almost all the rice balls from the soup kitchen for evacuees had been distributed, Mr. Nobuo Nishioka, chief of the Revenue Division, rushed into the community center, with an expression of deep concern on his face. “Retreat! Let’s retreat beyond the 20-km radius right now!”

Mr. Nishioka had intended to speak only to the township officials working there, but his voice echoed throughout the Karino Community Center, where many evacuated residents heard the unexpected words.

“Explain what is happening!” evacuees shouted. Mr. Nishioka regretted that he had spoken in public; yet he explained the current situation to the residents as calmly as possible.

“According to information obtained from the community wireless system a short while ago, we should retreat beyond a 20-km radius of the nuclear power plant right now. The place to go is Tsushima Regional Development Center. I’m sorry that you have had no explanation of the current situation, but be prepared to depart immediately. The buses are waiting, and will leave in sequence,” Mr. Nishioka announced.

Evacuated residents appeared to be in a mood of accumulated resentment, but Mr. Nishioka’s calm explanation made them change their indecisive attitude, and they responded to another evacuation move.

Toru, working to distribute the rice balls made by Ms. Suzuki and others, said to him, “Mr. Nishioka, I will bring the rice balls that have already been made for the evacuees with me.”

Mr. Nishioka said, “Forget it. Evacuate right now!”

Toru thought that he should bring the food for the evacuees, but in accordance with Mr. Nishioka’s instructions, he immediately went back to Karino Elementary School to guide people to the evacuation buses. Ms. Suzuki’s red hands, which he saw when he left the community center, touched Toru’s heart.

At 6.25 p.m. on March 12, 2011, the Japanese Government issued an evacuation order for the residents within a 20-km radius of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. Following this order, the disaster countermeasures headquarters in the Tsushima branch office issued directives for the evacuation of both residents and evacuees within this area.

When Toru arrived at the Karino Elementary School, the local people there had already been informed of the new evacuation order. Evacuees talked to one another in a flurry of speculation.

“A while ago, we heard a blast in the school yard. It was like a big bang from fireworks.”

“From outside the gymnasium, I saw huge clouds of gas in the eastern sky, accompanied by the sound of a huge explosion.”

“I guess the nuclear power plant has finally exploded.”

“The evacuation order could mean a retreat from the nuclear power plant.”

These conjectures and rumors were further spurred by the unusual appearance of the Fukushima Prefectural Police officers on patrol duty around the Elementary School. The evacuees noted their presence, and were extremely anxious because they were wearing white protective suits and large masks that looked like gas masks.

March 11, 2011: Namie Township (E)

Without reliable information, Toru felt a fear beyond words. He also felt insecure about the lack of information provided by his boss, Mr. Nomura, via the community wireless system. When his colleague Ms. Kumiko Ishida from the same Division of Resident Livelihood saw Toru working at the main gate of Karino Elementary School, she approached him, asking, “Did Mr. Nomura contact you?”

“No, not yet,” Toru replied.

“Without Mr. Nomura’s instructions and permission for another evacuation, should we guide them to another site?”

“The town residents here have already been informed of the government’s evacuation order, so we have no choice but to guide them,” Toru answered.

“No. I think we should wait for Mr. Nomura’s instructions. Mr. Kinoshita, a spontaneous move can be dangerous,” said Ms. Ishida.

Residents and evacuees were gathering in groups at the main gate of the Elementary School, where the buses were waiting for evacuation. To the local residents and evacuees, it appeared that Toru was guiding them to the buses.

They demanded harshly of Toru “Hey, get us on the bus.”

“No, wait for a minute, please. We are now confirming the destination and the evacuation route to it. I would appreciate it if you could wait a second,” Toru replied.

“What are you saying? You heard the evacuation order, right? Let us leave here on the westbound bus right now! The explosion has occurred! No time to waste!”

Toru was not contacted by Mr. Nomura, who did not respond to Toru’s wireless contact either. Toru attempted to communicate with Mr. Nomura using his private cell phone, but the cell phone network had not functioned at all since immediately after the earthquake the previous day. In case the contingency plan that Toru himself had made for the township residents was not proceeding, Mr. Nomura might have remained at the township hall and had not had time to communicate. Toru was therefore not aware of the situation in Namie Township, just 5 km east of his current location. “If by any chance...,” Toru was thinking of the worst-case scenario, and felt a panic attack coming. “What should I do next?”

March 11, 2011: Namie Township (F)

Ms. Ishida, Toru's junior colleague, was a bystander—she just watched Toru being abused by the local people. Toru looked very anguished; she had never seen him that way. Toru always looked calm and generous, and acted in a fair and honest manner in the workplace. However, on that day Toru looked exhausted and small.

While Toru was dealing with the complaints in front of the buses, he at last received a call from Mr. Nomura via the wireless system. His instruction was to leave for Tsushima Regional Development Center. Mr. Nomura also explained that Tsushima was located more than 30 km from the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant, and that there would be enough places for evaluation sites, such as elementary and junior high schools, near the Tsushima Center. Now that Toru had received instructions from his boss, he started to get the people, whose frustration was reaching a peak, on the buses to Tsushima.

Toru also boarded the first bus, leaving the role of guiding the next bus to Ms. Ishida. Toru fell asleep on the bus, which was caught in a traffic jam of private cars that was causing gridlock in the evacuation on Route 114. Exhausted and hungry, Toru's body was reaching a critical limit, and more importantly, he felt crushed under the pressure of mental fatigue. All he had eaten since the earthquake on March 11 was a single rice ball that Ms. Suzuki had made and given him. That was it.

March 11, 2011: Namie Township (G)

March 13: Tsushima Evacuation Sites

Because Toru was completely exhausted, he did not remember arriving in Tsushima, nor whether he guided the people to the Tsushima Center. What he did recall, however, was the morning of March 13, two days after the strong earthquake hit. He did not remember all the details, but remembered that like other local people, he slept on a blanket in the Tsushima Center. When he got up, Toru found Mr. Nomura sleeping flat on his back next to Toru. Someone told Toru that Mr. Nomura had shuttled passengers from Namie to Tsushima, and that he had arrived on the last shuttle. He was in a deep sleep.

On that day, Toru, with his divisional colleagues, first walked around the evacuation sites in Tsushima, including the junior high school, Choanji Temple, Hazuki Community Center, and Tsushima High School. They brought the community wireless system devices into the disaster countermeasures headquarters located in the Tsushima Branch Office, which now had the township office functions with the base phone installed. Toru and other officers went around with cordless handsets to report to Mr. Nomura on the situation in the respective evacuation sites and of the people who had fled from Namie Township.

The situation in the evacuation sites was, in short, a complete mess. This was a result of people's anxiety from losing touch with family members, relatives, and acquaintances, and being unable to obtain information on where they were.

The evacuees all looked exhausted and they were clearly suffering from sorrow and anger. When some evacuees became particularly angry, Toru requested that Mr. Nomura, rather than himself, deal with them. In reality, many of them calmed down when Mr. Nomura and other officials in managerial positions talked to them.

Toru and Ms. Ishida watched their bosses act, and Ms. Ishida said to Toru, "How come Mr. Nomura can deal successfully with the complaints from the residents? It is not because he replies with a kind look on his face, like a Buddhist saint, is it?"

Toru replied, "It's perhaps because his position and experience influence his karma and attitude. The local residents must feel that in their bones. He has broad shoulders!"

“Do you think so? I don’t think people trust him just because of his position,” said Ms. Ishida.

Toru also did not think that his position or title made a difference, but he was too tired to consider the matter any further.

That night, a variety of emergency relief goods began to arrive. First, a huge number of blankets sent from Niigata Prefecture arrived. In the same container were supplies of alpha rice for emergency rations. From acquaintances that she had made through her volunteer activities, Ms. Ishida had received some vegetables, such as Chinese cabbage, potato, and spinach, which were kept for the next day’s soup kitchen activities. Dinner that day was alpha rice balls, which were firmer, partly because the water adjustment for cooking alpha rice was unfamiliar and they were cooked in unfamiliar surroundings. Toru and the others delivered the rice balls wrapped in the alpha rice bags to evacuees at the sites.

The lighting was on at Tsushima, so it was not completely dark. However, it seemed that people’s anxieties grew and burst forth at night. Many people had been forced to relocate repeatedly, and some were crying and complaining: “I won’t move anymore. This place is the final destination, right?” Some township officials attempted to calm them down, and said, “Yes, yes, that’s right. We won’t move again.” However, these words would later be seen as a “lie” by the evacuees, and the township officials would be afflicted by a guilty conscience. Both the township residents and officers were placed in extreme situations there.

When Toru returned to the headquarters for a rest after distributing the rice balls, a very old woman, who looked over 90 years old, abruptly ran into the office. She found Toru, who was distributing rice balls, and shouted at him, “You are eating something here!” Toru replied, “What’s wrong with you? We are eating just rice balls, the same as those I distributed to you.”

The old lady shouted, “I am 92 years old, and I have lost my teeth. I am taking medicine for my stomach trouble. How can you make me eat such firmly cooked rice balls? Why can’t you give me a piece of soft bread? You have vegetables there. Why don’t you make miso soup with vegetables for me? Right now!”

“Excuse me, ma’am, these vegetables are ingredients for tomorrow’s soup kitchen activities. Can you wait until tomorrow morning?” Immediately after Toru spoke to the old lady, he deeply regretted that what he had said, which had made the

situation worse. For one hour after this happened, township officers had to keep apologizing for what he had said. Toru deeply regretted that he had not cooked something with the vegetables.

March 15: From Tsushima to Nihonmatsu

The evacuation sites at Tsushima had lighting and they received emergency relief goods, including pastries. In that respect, it was thought that the evacuation sites there were better than the others were.

On the other hand, a huge number of pastries were beyond or close to their use-by date, so many health-conscious people did not eat them. The evacuees were also tired of receiving only sweet buns. When they became less anxious about hunger, their fear of radiation and long-term concerns for the future grew.

Toru checked the evacuation sites at Tsushima to monitor the situation there. After returning to the last site at Choanji Temple, he encountered one resident who had walked all the way from Namie Township to the Tsushima Center. When he tried to approach the person, somebody wearing a protective suit appeared and guided the person to another place. This was the first of the latecomers to be “screened” at a Tsushima evacuation site. Toru could not hear clearly, but he thought he heard the words “exposed to radiation.” That resident was not allowed to enter the evacuation site like other people, and was guided away. Toru did not know where that person was moved, and nor did he know who the person wearing the protective suit was.

Immediately after encountering this fearful scene, Toru received a wireless call from Mr. Nomura. Mr. Nomura said, “Retreat to another evacuation site. Be prepared right now. The destination is Towa Cultural Center in Nihonmatsu City. Don’t talk to the evacuees yet, because it will cause another panic. Do not disclose it until all the division officers are ready.”

Because this was another emergency situation, Toru could not confirm with Mr. Nomura what was happening. Later, Toru regretted not asking him what had happened. However, within five minutes the news of another round of retreat reached the evacuees for some reason. Toru was completely confused about what to do.

March 11, 2011: Namie Township (H)

Although the evacuation order to the Towa Center had been received, Toru, who usually took the lead in executing orders, did not proceed immediately because he felt that if he did so, the evacuees would notice and realize there would be another retreat.

Mr. Nomura found Toru in the office and urged him to move. “Toru, move swiftly. The information has already spread. It won’t help to wait. Be prepared right now to guide the residents in another retreat!”

Toru, in an absent sort of way, was spurred on by Mr. Nomura’s pep talk. After rapid preparations, Toru moved to the parking area where he guided the evacuees to the buses for Nihonmatsu. The information on the destination was confused. Some officers mistakenly gave the instruction to guide the evacuees to the Nihonmatsu City Hall, rather than the Towa Culture Center in Nihonmatsu City. To take the lead, Toru boarded the first bus to the Towa Center.

On arriving at the Towa Culture Center, Toru found that large pieces of paper had been put on the wall by the entrance to the center, containing information on the designated evacuation sites. He also found that emergency aid goods, such as sea biscuits and drinking water, were in the first floor lobby of the center. The officials from Nihonmatsu City soon approached Toru, who was unfamiliar with the geography of the Towa District, to assist him in getting around.

Toru, who had to follow a series of unexpected evacuation orders and take the lead in guiding the residents for evacuation, felt somewhat relieved in Nihonmatsu for some reason. He thought the relief came from being some distance from the nuclear power plant, but was not sure. Toru worked hard guiding the evacuees who were arriving in Towa in groups to alight from the buses. After settling all the evacuees into the sites at night, Toru returned to the Towa Center. There he found a corner sheltered from wind near the entrance of the center, where he fell asleep, alone with a blanket.

March 11, 2011: Namie Township (I)

During the two weeks following their arrival at the Towa Culture Center on March 15, 2011, the atmosphere of the township community amid the bustle was marked by complaints from evacuees seeking information. The township officials were busy responding to their calls, which also caused many fights among the officials. Workload assignments for the divisions were different, which fueled frictions among them. Hard work, without a clear distinction between public and private matters, also caused some officials to have great difficulty in keeping their mental balance.

To alleviate this confusion in the chain of command of the disaster countermeasures office, a new policy was decided whereby task force groups would be formed. The first task force organized was an administrative management group, for which a new chain of command was sought. Another task force was for administrative management, including staffing for each evacuation site, where emergency relief aid goods were to be distributed. In response to newly emerging needs, such as provisional housing and relief money, transitional accommodation at hotels and inns was organized until temporary houses were built, and responsibility for the necessary personnel and works was assigned to the administrative management task force team. For temporary housing management, a housing support task force was created. For communicating with people in secondary evacuation sites such as hotels and inns, a livelihood support task force was created. A flexible system based on task force groups improved on-site responses significantly, while its flexibility placed complex demands on officials who had been transferred from other work. Toru was also once assigned to the livelihood support group, but 30 minutes later was transferred to the housing support group.

Issues emerged over who should coordinate matters, how to allocate those matters that could not be dealt with by a single group, and how to handle matters in which more than two groups were involved. Some task force groups played hot potato with other groups, and intergroup conflicts were emerging.

Even two weeks after their arrival at Towa, cell phones were not functioning, and the communication system had not been restored. Thanks to donations from cell phone communication companies, emergency cell phones were distributed to the township officials, who made use of them to rebuild a communication system for their assigned areas.

Toru, as a member of the housing support group, responded to telephone inquiries from the local residents, who were planning to submit applications for housing and housing loans. Such work was new to Toru, but some of the paperwork was not completely new to him. He also received many requests and complaints not directly related to his work, which flooded the phone lines. Too many claims and insoluble complaints on consecutive days made many officers sick. Private phone numbers were leaked to outsiders, and Toru's private cell phone also rang day and night. He was tempted to throw his own phone away, but he needed it to communicate with his family and friends who were worried about him, so he often turned it off when he was not using it.

After Toru was assigned to housing support, he did not have sufficient opportunities to contact his boss and colleagues. One day, early in the morning, his junior colleague Ms. Ishida visited Toru at Towa Culture Center. Ms. Ishida invited Toru for a smoke.

“Ishida, do you smoke?” Toru asked.

“I quit smoking when I graduated from university. But this situation has triggered my desire to smoke. Senior colleague, would you like a cigarette, if I may ask?”

Toru could not resist her offer, and took a cigarette and lit it. For him too, it was the first time in several years that he had smoked.

After he finished his cigarette, Ms. Ishida did not talk to him. Toru felt a silence that he had not experienced for several weeks.

“This is my first quiet moment in a long time. One minute with this cigarette has been my only moment of peace in the whole day,” Toru said.

“Mr. Kinoshita, I have seen you since our evacuation from Namie Township to Tsushima. You still look deeply pained. I know everybody looks as if they are suffering, but are you okay?”

Toru fought to keep from crying in front of her, but he talked about the current situation handling phone calls.

Ms. Ishida asked “Can't you talk about it to your current boss?”

March 11, 2011: Namie Township (J)

Toru replied to Ms. Ishida as follows. “Well, other officials also handle telephone complaints in the same situation. How can I say, ‘I would like to be treated on an exception’ Furthermore, township residents are not calling out of malice. They are calling for something necessary. I cannot say to them ‘I cannot do it.’”

Ms. Ishida thought Toru had changed. Before the earthquake, he had always treated her kindly. She felt sorry and frustrated for him, but she could do nothing.

With the approach of dawn, Toru bowed to Ms. Ishida, and without comment walked back to the center.

March 11, 2011: Namie Township (K)

Disaster Victim

Things did not change even in April 2011. Working conditions remained bad. Few officials began and ended their duties on time. Almost all officials worked around the clock, taking only short naps. Both male and female officials stayed at the Towa Culture Center or Nihonmatsu City Towa Branch Office located nearby. The priority for meals was the residents, so township officials ate expired food such as rice balls and pot noodles. Many officials were tired of the very act of eating such food. They did not have enough time to rest. At times, local families offered them the opportunity to take a bath, but did not feel they could permit themselves such relaxation. If time permitted, they dealt with affairs for local residents rather than themselves. They sometimes felt that they themselves were real disaster victims, but they were unable to complain about the situation.

The mission of the taskforce group for housing support, to which Toru was assigned, was shifting from the evacuation stage to the settlement stage, and the group became extremely busy. In early April, Fukushima Prefecture started leasing and allocating houses to evacuated residents. At the beginning, many people applied, hoping for “a way out of an evacuation site.” However, inconvenience and complaints of bad location and old houses as well as inconvenient living environments caused a flood of cancellations. Because of the cancellations, the delivery of home electrical appliances and basic goods for daily life had to be stopped temporarily. Flexibility was introduced into the housing lease system. For instance, an exceptional system was introduced. It was one whereby the residents found houses to live in first, which were then leased by the prefecture. In this way, their “private” housing was regarded as “public” housing. However, these trial and error practices resulted in a flood of inquiries and the officials spent too much time reacting to them.

Toru had remained busy dealing with endless telephone claims since the beginning of his assignment to the taskforce. However, he gradually understood the nature of the business, and did a better job in dealing with claims. Thus, he was also recovering his nerve. Nevertheless, he still was full of woe. For instance, the task force first delivered daily essentials to the temporary and leased housing only. As a result,

Toru received the following claims: “Evacuees should be treated equally,” and “Do not neglect voluntary evacuees.” Some of the claims were certainly true, Toru felt. He offered profuse apologies over such a disconnection between the norm and the reality.

March 11, 2011: Namie Township (L)

A Dispute over a Pet

One day, in the course of his work, Toru received a phone call from a middle-aged citizen, Mr. Hirotsugu Yamamoto. He claimed, “Hey, somebody has a pet on the evacuation site!” Since the retreat from Namie to Towa, via Tsushima, pets had not been allowed on the evacuation sites, so many of those who evacuated with pets were living in their cars. It could not be helped.

Mr. Yamamoto was living with a pet dog in his car parked near Shinden Gymnasium. It was still cold at night in April in Fukushima, and he had to start the engine for heating, for which he spent extra money. He was also worried about the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning. When Mr. Yamamoto found that an old retired couple had a small dog on the evacuation site, a small war had broken out between them. Toru decided to meet Mr. Yamamoto face to face, rather than talking over the phone.

On hanging up the phone, Toru left the center for the gym, realizing that it had been a very long time since he had left his office. On arriving at the gym, he soon identified Mr. Yamamoto at the entrance: he was the person standing at the entrance, holding a medium-sized dog in his arms and looking angry and frustrated.

“You are Mr. Yamamoto, right? How do you do? Please tell me about the people with a small dog in the gym,” Toru said.

Mr. Yamamoto shouted, “Talk counts for nothing. They say no deal for pets, so why are those who cannot follow the rules living comfortably on the evacuation site?”

Toru attempted to calm Mr. Yamamoto, who was highly emotional, and decided to meet the aged couple, Mr. Toshiro Kawakami and Mrs. Tomiko Kawakami, who were lying on blankets at the corner of the gym.

“How do you do? My name is Kinoshita from Namie Township Office. Sorry for disturbing you, but may I talk to you for a while?” Toru asked.

“There is nothing to talk to you about. Just maybe about the dog? Some days ago, a township official visited us and permitted us to stay here with the dog, so why don’t you let it go?”

“Is that so? Do you remember what the official said to you? According to the rules, pets are not allowed to stay in the evacuation site,” Toru explained.

“We don’t have a car. We don’t have a place to stay except the evacuation site. This dog is a member of our family. Could you leave a family member behind? This dog is small, quiet, and too old to move around. That’s why we were told by the township official “No harm done, that’s okay.”

Toru did not know what to do. Mr. Yamamoto, who was behind him listening to the conversation between Toru and the old couple, howled, “Pets are not allowed, regardless of their size. Small or medium is not the issue! If a small dog is permitted, allow me to stay here with my dog too!”

To comply with the existing rules, Toru could not grant an exception. However, he fully understood the affection of the old couple for their pet, and that the fact that they could not leave it behind in the disaster. He needed think what to say, and to whom.

March 11, 2011: Namie Township (M)

Another Relocation of the Township Office

On May 23, 2011, it was decided that the functions of Namie Township Office should move to yet another site, the Fukushima Gender Equality Center, located in Nihonmatsu City.

Toru reflected on another relocation, “The township officials wished to settle down in our own place to live without another move, but we were told that the priority for the officials was the lowest, so we would not be able to live in temporary or rental housing for the townspeople. Therefore, we had to find places by ourselves. However, private apartments were later certified by the township government as public rental housing. Thus, a few township officers were living in temporary housing. They started commuting from their rental housing to the Gender Equality Center, to which the Namie Township Office functions had been relocated.”

In this way, township officials were gradually settled in “public” housing, and almost all temporary and rental housing facilities were occupied by August 2011. Thus, the township office restored a sense of calm, at least in terms of livelihood.

“At about that point, an imbalance in workload between those who could stop working on time and those who could not do so became salient, and in response to this imbalance, orderly human resource allocation was planned little by little. The township office started intentionally placing the right people in the right jobs,” recalled Toru.

Looking back, Ms. Kumiko Ishida described the situation at that time.

“The administrative workloads across divisions were visibly imbalanced. In a difficult set of circumstances, when no clear answers were available, some divisions were facing heavy workloads, while other divisions watched the clock.”

She added, “On the other hand, however, some were told, ‘leave by 11 p.m. This building is a prefectural facility.’ We had to follow that rule, but I felt sorry for those who were working hard.”

Toru added, “Those who could deal with the problems to which there was no solution were soon transferred to other divisions. Those who dealt with routine work could return home on time. Nobody can blame it on anybody. For those who were assigned to busy divisions, their workloads were endless.”

Discussion Questions

1. Was the triple disaster in Fukushima a natural or a man-made one? Which victims were worst affected? Who should be held responsible for the nuclear disaster?
2. In your opinion, what was the most difficult ethical dilemma Toru faced in taking the lead in the evacuation activities in the triple disaster response? How do you evaluate Toru's moral resilience as a public officer and a private citizen amid the series of events in the difficult evacuation process?
3. How did the Namie Township Office think about and plan for the triple disasters and crises? How do you evaluate Namie Township's response to the triple disaster? What kinds of policy actions or inaction do you think were the most ethically problematic?
4. What lessons can we learn from the evacuation experience of Namie Township?
5. From your specific perspective, how much risk should society accept in the use of nuclear energy, and in which process?