



A large red and blue cargo ship is washed ashore, surrounded by debris. A man in a blue jacket is riding a bicycle past the ship. The ship's hull is red and blue, and it has the number '655' on its side. The background shows a clear sky and some distant buildings.

# 05:46

## MARCH 11, 2011

### DISASTER STRUCK

**KESENNUMA, JAPAN**  
A man rides past a ship washed ashore surrounded by debris in the Shinhamacyo area two weeks after a massive earthquake, one of the most powerful ever recorded, and an accompanying tsunami hit northern Japan. Nearly 16,000 people perished and many remain missing 11 years later.

*I awoke to a call from a friend who urged me to turn on the TV. I'd had an eerily similar call years earlier, on the morning of January 17, 1995, when an earthquake had struck the city of Kobe (also at 5:46am – Japan time). • Back then, I was a student living in Tokyo but my family lived close to Kobe, in western Japan, so my first concern then was whether they were safe. It was 24 hours before I could get through to them. • This time, I was working as First Secretary at the Japanese Embassy in London, responsible for communications. A magnitude 9 earthquake had struck the country's northeast coast, triggering a massive tsunami. Immediately, I headed for the office. • On the way, text messages began to pour in from people offering their condolences. At the embassy, my team was already inundated by calls from the public, concerned about family and friends, as well as interview requests from the media ...*

**T**HE SCALE OF THE CATASTROPHE CAUSED by the Tohoku earthquake and the ensuing tsunami on March 11, 2011 was unprecedented in Japan. As the Prime Minister, Naoto Kan, put it at the time: “In the 65 years since the end of the Second World War, this is the toughest and the most difficult crisis for Japan.”

Nearly 16,000 people perished or remain missing. The country not only faced the wrenching loss of life caused by the natural disasters, but also had to deal with the risk posed by damage to several nuclear facilities at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant complex, the worst such nuclear incident since Chernobyl. And the operator of the complex, Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), came in for severe criticism for how it managed the crisis.

Brunswick's Daisuke Tsuchiya, who at the time was First Secretary in charge of communications at Japan's London embassy, gives a firsthand account of what it was like for a diplomat to deal with such a catastrophe in one of the world's media hubs. This article first appeared in March 2014 and has been lightly updated for this 2022 issue.

**Reaching the embassy, we had to quickly decide our immediate crisis communications strategy.**

With time constraints and only limited information, we tried to focus on three main tasks. First, we needed to inform the global audience of the action being taken. The Japanese government had established a special task force within four minutes of the earthquake. More than 100,000 Self-Defense Forces were deployed for rescue operations. Precautionary evacuation zones were put in place around the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Plant from day one. It was important to provide reassurance that the Japanese government was taking swift action.

**“I WOULD ABSOLUTELY REFUTE THE SUGGESTION THAT THERE WAS A CONSCIOUS ATTEMPT TO CONCEAL INFORMATION. TRANSPARENCY WAS OUR BOTTOM LINE.”**

Second, we needed to assure the global audience that transparency would be a priority. It was a very fluid situation and much was unclear at the outset, with limited information available to the government. So, we felt it was important to emphasize that information would be delivered as accurately and swiftly as possible and nothing would be concealed.

Third, it was important for us in the diplomatic corps to express gratitude for the support offered to Japan. Being based in London, we needed to thank the British government, industry and the public for their support. The response was amazing, with endless offers of help and support from people all over the UK. For example, the designer Sir Paul Smith was in Japan shortly after the disaster and called on British businesses to continue to trade with the country. The Birmingham Royal Ballet went on its tour of Japan as scheduled, only two months later.

**There was also a long-term task at hand: how to minimize any damage to the country's reputation.**

We needed to ensure that false information did not put people off visiting Japan or from buying Japanese products. Many earthquake contingency measures had worked, the recovery was moving ahead, and crucially, the radiation levels in most of Japan were normal. The Chief Scientific Adviser to the British government was helpful in this respect, giving a factual analysis to calm concerns over radioactivity.

Some key messages we sought to convey to the public via the media were:

- The early warning system successfully halted around 30 high-speed trains that were running in the affected areas at the time, preventing them from derailing. The high-speed rail system resumed full service just over a month later.
- The main regional airport in northeast Japan, Sendai, was submerged entirely by the tsunami on the day, but was ready for operation just a month later, as were many damaged roads.
- The actual level of radiation in the main cities, such as Tokyo, and even Sendai, near Fukushima, were at or below those in London only three weeks later.

**Correcting misinformation outside Japan was crucial.**

The embassy in London issued its own holding statement and began accepting interview requests. In total, I did around 30 in the first week, including the BBC, Sky, CNBC, Colombian and Iranian television, and local radio stations.

On day one, the media mainly had factual questions about the earthquake and tsunami. On day two, I was in a BBC Radio studio doing an interview, when news came in about the first explosion at Fukushima. The interviewer immediately asked me—on air—for information about an event I knew nothing about.

As time went by, the media's probing became much more critical. We were asked why the evacuation advice given by the Japanese government was different from that given by some foreign governments. Some questioned whether the Japanese government was releasing all the information it had. There were erroneous reports, such as those claiming that foreign companies were not being allowed in for reconstruction. For us, the need for transparency and to correct misinformation quickly in order to minimize reputational damage was key.

Criticism of both TEPCO and the government after an accident like that was inevitable. But I would absolutely refute the suggestion that there was a conscious attempt to conceal information. Transparency was our bottom line.

**To ensure timely and accurate information was being provided, we used multiple channels of communication.**

In the first week, the embassy set up a photo exhibition with the help of the Japanese media, showing scenes on the ground, including British search and rescue teams. Website content was updated constantly to stay current.

To communicate that Japan was up and running, ready to welcome visitors and to do business, the embassy held talks by academics, invited journalists to Japan, and held a "Visit Japan" campaign event with local celebrities.

London correspondents for Japanese media played a crucial role in communicating to the afflicted regions the significant level of international support—in our case, from the UK.

There were charity events to raise funds for the victims everywhere: at churches, shopping centers, even primary schools.

**LESSONS LEARNED** One of the key communications lessons learned from this crisis was to be forthcoming, even if you do not immediately have all the answers. The fear of appearing incompetent often leads companies and governments to wait until they have the full picture, but the patience of the public does not allow that anymore. Today, someone somewhere will be accurately or inaccurately disseminating information. Silence is

**"THE  
INTERNATIONAL  
PERCEPTION OF  
JAPAN ACTUALLY  
IMPROVED  
IN THE WAKE OF  
THE CRISIS."**

perceived as a lack of transparency and can be damaging rather than appearing inept.

Another lesson was how the response to a crisis can shape public sentiment for the better. The international perception of Japan actually improved in the wake of the crisis. In a BBC World Service poll of people from 22 countries between December 2011 and February 2012, Japan topped the table globally with 58% positive perception.

I believe this can be attributed to the way the media widely covered the great resolve and strength of those affected.

**THE FUTURE** Eleven years later, the effects of the disaster are not over. Reconstruction will take many years yet. The full containment and shutdown of the Fukushima plant is something that Japan continues to deal with, while the damage and pain inflicted on victims and their families will never go away.

But Japan has a long history of crisis and reconstruction, and I believe the recovery of the afflicted regions will, in time, be yet another chapter in the story of the country's resilience. ♦

**DAISUKE TSUCHIYA** is a Partner based in Brunswick's London office and is Head of the firm's Japan practice, leading a team of more than 20 Japan experts and bilingual advisors in Tokyo and around the world.

## BEWARE THE FEARMONGERS

**The specter of fear surrounding a nuclear incident is hard to combat, even in the face of hard evidence.**



**IN AN OP-ED PIECE IN *THE NEW YORK Times*** in October 2013, David Ropeik, a journalist and consultant who teaches a course on risk communication for public health issues at the Harvard Extension School, asked, "Why does our fear of all things nuclear persist?" This came after he noted alarmist reports about workers at the Fukushima plant being doused with radioactive water, even though the evidence from Fukushima

**Risk assessment: A worker checks for radiation at the Fukushima Daiichi power plant in June 2013 (above).**

and Chernobyl shows there is relatively little risk.

"The robust evidence that ionizing radiation is a relatively low health risk dramatically contradicts common fears," Ropeik wrote.

It is a problem that is not confined just to nuclear but extends to other complicated, science-based subjects. Introducing his Harvard course, Ropeik explained, "Our ideas about complex environmental and public health issues, such as climate change, industrial chemicals and species extinction are largely formed by simplistic and dramatized media coverage and distorting political spin from all sides."

Ropeik told the *Brunswick Review*, "It's not just a question of who the media talk to, of course, but how they use that information. As with many stories, the riskier aspects of radiation-related stories get played up. Such information comes more from anti-nuclear advocates, so they get quoted higher in the story, even if the reporter has talked to neutral sources as well."