

## A Review of Japanese Government Response to the Public Crises of Earthquakes

SONG Hang<sup>[a],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup>School of Economics, Nankai University, Tianjing, China.

\*Corresponding author.

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### Abstract

The disaster prevention plans and laws formulated by the Japanese government have successfully coped with the public crisis resulting from the Great East Japan (magnitude 9.0) earthquake. Meanwhile, the Japanese government took effective measures to cut losses, maintain social order, and organize the post-disaster reconstruction. However, some problems, such as delayed rescue, mishandling of nuclear leakage, and opaque information have been questioned by the public. This article will employ the theory of public management and public policy to review and analyze the above phenomena.

**Key words:** Great east Japan earthquake; Public crisis management; Public policy; The ability of government

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### INTRODUCTION

As is known to us, public policy is the scheme that is made by public authorities through the political process to settle public problems, achieve the common object, and realize the common benefits. It is used to regulate and direct the activity of institutions, organizations, and individuals. This paper takes the occurrence of the earthquake in Japan in 2011 as an example, and analyzes the government in the face of a temporary crisis; through crisis management system is expected to play a role in rapid bursts before

the disaster. The preparation mechanism formulated by the Japanese government plays an important role in the response to and recovery from earthquake disasters and all secondary disaster crises. The government agencies are set up reasonably. Moreover, the central and local disaster relief agencies cooperate with each other properly and in an orderly fashion. Crisis information collection and release are timely except during the nuclear leak, and social mood is basically stable.

### 1. THEORETICAL METHODS

#### 1.1 Public Crisis Management Theory

“A crisis is a status of disintegration, in which people’s important life goals suffer setbacks, or their life cycles and their coping methods are destroyed” said Jirong Yan, Professor of the Government Management School at Peking University (Yan, 2011, p.271). Robert Heath considers that a crisis is an event with uncertainty, which will result in potential negative influences. Such an event may bring great loss to the organization, as well as its staff, products, services, assets and reputation (Health, 2001, p.13). Laurence Barton goes along with the idea that only those incidents that are unpredictable, neglected, and subversive are serious crises (Barton, 2002, p.3). Rosenthal Uriel defines the crisis to be an event that brings great threats to the basic values and behavioral framework of a social system, and this event requires critical decision-making in an uncertain and urgent situation (Rosenthal & Charles, 1989).

Any event or status that will threaten the security of public life and property is thought to be a public crisis (Zhang, 2007, p.512). Prof. Guoqing Zhang from the Government Management School at Peking University defines a public crisis as a status or event that is abnormal and will threaten basic social value standards in a public administration. This status or event is uncertain, unstable,

and threatening, and at the same time it will pose severe damage to life and property, cause scares in public, and destroy public order and public relationships.

Depending on the nature of the crisis, it could be classified as a natural disaster crisis or a man-made disaster crisis. Furthermore, the crisis could be classified as five types: political crisis, social crisis, economic crisis, productive crisis, and natural crisis. From the perspective of actual phenomena all over the world, it is likely that a single crisis will eventually develop into multiple crises. Therefore it is necessary for the government to enhance the capability of public crisis management.

Natural disaster crises include drought, floods, hail, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, blizzards, typhoons or hurricanes, tsunamis, tornados, landslides, debris flow, insect pests, salty tides, desertification, epidemic infectious diseases, and all other natural disasters. These disasters may bring drastic, great or even total disruption to people's lives, production, and property.

Based on the above presentation, we come to the conclusion that once the government fails to handle a crisis properly, it will greatly impact the social order and people's daily lives. Hence in the background of a "risk society", how to deal with the crisis has become an issue for national governments, non-governmental organizations, and individuals.

Since the crisis is a public phenomenon, accordingly the public crisis management activity should be public goods. The government as a matter of course plays a leading role among all providers of this production. Besides, how the government handles the public crisis is regarded as an important indicator for evaluating their capability.

## 1.2 Public Policy Theory

The study of public theory has become an issue since the publication of "Policy Science: the New Development of Scope and Method" written by Harold Lasswell and Daniel Lerner in 1951. These Western political scientists claimed that the generation of policy science is not only the "scientific revolution" in the development of social science, but also "the most significant breakthrough" in contemporary Western politics and "the most significant development of contemporary public administration" (Huo & Wu, 2007, p.80).

Public policy is the scheme that is made by public authorities through the political process to settle public problems, achieve the common object, and realize the common benefits. It is used to regulate and direct the activity of institutions, organizations, and individuals. The expressed forms include law and rule, administrative regulation and order, oral or written instructions from national leaders, plans of government, and so on.

The object of the study of public policy is organization but not individuals, and what is more, only the organizations that serve the general public are the object

of public policy research, and the essence of which is the government's decision-making behavior.

When facing the unexpected public crisis, whether the government is able to come up with an effective strategy to maintain the social public interest is an important standard for evaluating the capability of government.

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## 2. CASE STUDY: GREAT EAST JAPAN EARTHQUAKE

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### 2.1 Overview

On March 11, 2011, in Japanese local time a quarter to fifteen, a 9.0 Richter earthquakes struck the northeast Japan Sea and resulted in a tsunami of 24 meters high, which caused heavy casualties and property losses to the Japanese.

The epicenter of earthquake was located in the Pacific Ocean, in the eastern region of the Mayagi Prefecture. The focal depth was 10 km. Moreover, Tokyo also experienced a strong quake. The tsunami generated by the earthquake affected most places on the Pacific Coast. What is more, the earthquake also caused the first nuclear incident at the power plant in Fukushima.

On April 1, at the Cabinet Meeting of Japan, officials decided to name this earthquake the "Great North Japan Earthquake". According to Japanese media, the North Japan Earthquake has resulted in a casualties of 15,741, and 4,467 persons are still missing as of August 28<sup>1</sup>.

### 2.2 Government's Countermeasures to Crisis

Located in a fire-prone and earthquake-prone area, Japan frequently suffers from earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. In addition, problems because of typhoons and fire disasters are also frequent. Also, because of the high rainfall and raging rivers, flooding is common. Consequently, the core mission of crisis management of the Japanese Government is to cope with natural disasters. With the advent of the Tokyo subway sarin attack made by the Japanese Aum Doomsday Cult and the 9-11 terrorist attacks in America, the crisis management of the Japanese government now extends to a more extensive range of crises (economic and security are ranked as crisis management). Coping mechanisms are becoming more and more perfect. Comprehensive critical management is regarded as essential.

When facing a crisis, the Japanese government has a mature crisis management system. Specifically, the decision-making action will be implemented by three administrative levels, which include the central government, prefecture, and country. Each administrative level will hold a conference each term to make up and implement the disaster prevention plan (Guo, 2006, p.211). In a severe crisis, the prime minister of the cabinet plays

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<sup>1</sup> *Announcement of People Power* on August 28.

the role of the highest-ranking commander. The Chief Cabinet Secretary is responsible for coordination and communication. The crisis response is formulated by the Security Council, Cabinet Council, and Central Disaster Prevention Council. The National Policy Agency, Defense Agency, Coast Guard, Fire and Disaster Management Agency, as well as all other ministries will cooperate with one another to implement the plan. Their responsibilities are listed as follows:

The Prime Minister has full command in crisis management. According to the Japanese Constitution, the Prime Minister is entitled to represent the whole the cabinet to command all ministries. What is more, the Prime Minister has the right to nominate and remove members of cabinet, or even dismiss the House of Representatives. The Prime Minister should play a more important role during crisis management than in all other occasions.

The responsibilities of Chief Cabinet Secretary in crisis management are to collect information as soon as possible and transmit it to the related ministry, convene all departments to discuss the coping mechanisms, and adjust the strategy established by ministries comprehensively by make use of publicity to reduce public fear and anxiety. The reason the Chief Cabinet Secretary was selected to take charge of crisis management was to make the cabinet take countermeasures rapidly when an emergency happens.

The Security Council takes charge of the events related to national defense and national security, such as dealing with an armed attack. When emergencies related to national life and property happen, the prime minister will call up the related cabinet members to hold the Council of Ministers or Cabinet Meeting attended by all cabinet members and to make the decisions. The central disaster prevention council plays the main role in crisis management of natural disasters.

To deal with the crisis effectively, the government established a "Disaster Countermeasures Headquarters" to coordinate the execution of policy and measurements. At the same time, the government set up "Local Disaster Countermeasures Headquarters" in disaster areas. In an emergent state, the prefecture and country also build the "Disaster Countermeasures Headquarters" accordingly to exercise authority. Specifically, the "Disaster Countermeasures Headquarters" may be led by the prime minister once the event is quite urgent.

On the one hand, Japan makes use of the American intelligence system, while on the other hand strengthens its own intelligence system. Naicho is the most important intelligence department of Japan, and the leader of Naicho reports to the chief cabinet secretary directly. This department is mainly responsible for collecting, gathering, and analyzing intelligence. The intelligence department, led by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, is also important. In addition to gathering intelligence, radio waves and graphs,

this department also collects all intelligence that comes from the Japan Defense Agency and all other ministries. The Global Intelligence Department is led by Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Public Security Intelligence Agency and National Policy Agency of Japan are attached to Ministry of Justice, and the Japanese Coast Guard, affiliated with Ministry of Land Infrastructure and Transport, has its own intelligence department as well.

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### **3. ANALYSIS OF ACTUAL CRISIS RESPONSE**

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#### **3.1 From the View of Emergency Policy and Organizational Management**

The Japanese Meteorological Agency issued a tsunami warning to 37 coastal countries three minutes after the earthquake. The Prime Minister terminated the Congressional Award Meeting immediately and went to the Prime Minister's official residence, set up the "Resident Strategic Office", and convened all ministries of the cabinet to hold an emergency meeting. This countermeasures displays Japan's mature warning mechanism for coping with earthquakes and tsunamis, as it effectively plays its role before disaster.

Basing on the contingency plan of crisis management and local plan of disaster prevention, the local governments, including those of Iwate, Miyagi, Fukushima, Ibaraki, and Aomori counties, set up their "Disaster Countermeasures Headquarters". Shortly thereafter, the central government also established the "Great Disaster Countermeasures Headquarters" which is led by the Prime Minister. To handle the nuclear leak accident better, the Japan government established the "Resident Strategic Office of Nuclear Accident" at twenty-five to seventeen. The headquarters established by the central government plays an important role in disaster relief.

Later on, the "Disaster Countermeasures Headquarters" held a conference and formulated the basic policy of disaster countermeasures: Since the earthquake and tsunami had brought serious damage and the aftershock might even amplify the disaster, the central government would closely cooperate with local governments to rescue disaster victims, and meanwhile make great efforts to normalize people's lives and economics.

#### **3.2 From the View of Information Collecting and Information Transparency**

At eleven past sixteen, the "Great Disaster Countermeasures Headquarters" convened a meeting again. The Chief Cabinet Secretary deployed the mission to the ministries and formulated the regulation of information collecting and reporting.

In the afternoon, the Prime Minister convened a press conference and declared that the whole country would

endeavor in disaster relief, and at the same time asked the public to pay attention to reports of official television and to keep calm. Simultaneously, the Chief Cabinet Secretary held a press conference to introduce the disaster and countermeasures.

At about twenty past eighteen, the Disaster Prevention Minister asked the local governments and media to inform the drivers along the coast to listen to the radio and pay close attention to tsunami and emergency evacuations.

Later on, the central government decided to send a governmental investigation group to the Miyagi prefecture where the most serious disaster was. Early in the morning on March 12, the Chief Cabinet Secretary convened a press conference to inform the public of the state of the disaster and countermeasures of government. The central government also decided to send governmental investigation groups to Iwate and Fukushima prefectures once again.

By means of media to transmit information to the public, the government successfully gained people's confidence. Besides, information transparency also guaranteed the order of society. Moreover, sending the governmental investigation groups helped the government to set up more scientific and practical disaster relief.

### **3.3 From the View of Organizing the Rescue and Coping With Secondary Nuclear Crisis**

The Prime Minister issued an order to require the Japanese Self-Defense Forces to get ready to take maximum actions. Defense Minister Toshimi Kitazawa ordered a rescue team of more than 8,000 armed troops, 300 planes, and 40 ships to hurry to the disaster area.

At three past nineteen, in accordance with "Special Measures Law of Nuclear Disaster", the central government established "Nuclear Disaster Countermeasures Headquarters", and the Prime Minister declared a state of "Nuclear Disaster Emergency". At half past nineteen, the Minister of Defense issued the dispatch command to the Self-Defense Forces to cope with nuclear disaster.

The following day, the Prime Minister ordered that the evacuation range, which has a radius of 3 kilometers of Fukushima nuclear power plant, should be extended to a radius of 10 kilometers. The central government established the "Great Disaster Countermeasures Headquarters" in the Miyagi prefecture. At ten past seven, the Prime Minister arrived at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant by helicopter to inspect the situation, and announce the "Declaration of nuclear emergency".

At half past eight, the central government decided to dispatch 50,000 armed troops to make rescues. On that day, the nuclear leakage forces of Japanese Ground Self-Defense Forces and special weapon guard forces arrived at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant.

Compared to the Wenchuan Earthquake that happened in China in 2008, though the response of forces is relative

slow, and the scale is smaller, the Japanese army arrived at the disaster area in a timely manner. However, the government failed to inform the residents to evacuate from the nuclear leakage area in time, and the government's countermeasures lacked specificity. All these shortcomings are obvious.

### **3.4 From the View of Disaster Rehabilitation**

The monthly economic report released by Japanese government indicated that the highest economic losses caused by the earthquake and tsunami were maybe up to 25 trillion yen. Reviewing the reconstruction after the Hanshin earthquake, the Japanese government had invested 10 trillion yen to rebuild. Compared with the Hanshin earthquake, the magnitude of Great East Japan Earthquake was much higher, and thus the difficulties of reconstruction should be extremely high.

According to "The Retro-Revival Countermeasures Basic Law of Great East Japan Earthquake", which is supported by the "Rebuilding Support Law for Victims" and other 17 related drafts, the next five years are "the critical period of renaissance". To better carry out the reconstruction, the Japanese government is going to find a disaster prevention and renaissance ministry, which will be led by the Prime Minister, and elect a minister to take charge of this prefecture. Basically speaking, from the system planning and organizational setting, we can conclude that the Japanese government's performance is very experienced.

The earthquake and tsunami had caused huge damage to road, port, and all other infrastructure, according to "The Utilities of Treasury for Involvement of Public Civil Infrastructure", and the government will pay for the reconstruction. But now Japan is heavily in fiscal debt, and raising money is the highest priority after disaster. The democratic government decided to compile the first supplemental fiscal budget in April. A financial expenditure of 2 to 3 trillion yen was used for post-disaster reconstruction. This expenditure mainly came from raising treasury bonds. The Japanese government plans to set up a new special consumption tax, corporate tax, and social solidarity tax to raise the fiscal revenue<sup>2</sup>.

In addition, the nuclear leakage accident also brings lots of variables to reconstruction. Today, most of the area near the nuclear plant have not been rebuilt yet. The nuclear leakage and its following adverse impact will highly raise the difficulty of reconstruction. For a long time in the future, Fukushima, Ibaraki, and Miyagi Counties will be indirectly affected by the nuclear accident. Miyagi County is one of the most important rice-producing areas in Japan, and it brings lots of treasure to local residents, too. The agricultural output value of Fukushima County is ranked seventh in Japan,

<sup>2</sup> *The draft of Japan's post-disaster reconstruction.* Retrieved from <http://Chinanews.com>

and in production of carp ranked first. Since it is a main prefecture for agriculture and fish, the nuclear accident had made a fatal impact on this district, and it is very difficult for this area to recover. Besides, influenced by the nuclear accident, the tourism will be depressed for a long time<sup>3</sup>.

Moreover, this earthquake and its secondary disaster are very serious, and public psychology had been seriously damaged. It takes a long time for the public to get out from the psychology shadow. The psychological endurance of the aged is relatively fragile, and it is more difficult for them to recover.

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## CONCLUSION

The preparation mechanism formulated by the Japanese government plays an important role in the response to and recovery from earthquake disasters and all secondary disaster crises. The government agencies are set up reasonably. Moreover, the central and local disaster relief agencies cooperate with each other properly and in an orderly fashion. Crisis information collection and release are timely except during the nuclear leak, and social mood is basically stable. Nevertheless, the shortcomings are also outstanding; for example the Self-Defense Forces failed to arrive at the disaster area in time. The government mishandled the nuclear leakage accident and consequently this resulted in people's fear and dissatisfaction. These experiences and lessons are precious wealth for humanity for learning to cope with natural disasters and emergencies. It is necessary for us to summarize and study the course of this public crisis management.

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<sup>3</sup> *Japan's difficult Post-Disaster Reconstruction*. Retrieved from <http://Chinanews.com>.