



The 2016 Kumamoto Earthquakes

Activities of the Local Volunteer Fire Corps

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1 Occurrence of the earthquake

At 01:25 on April 16, 2016, I suffered a severe horizontal shock after a violent tremor as if the earth were heaving upward. I heard the announcement “An earthquake with a seismic intensity of 7 has occurred” over the community wireless system. Thinking “How terrible,” I headed to the village office almost in a trance. In total darkness without electricity along the way, I drove my car relying on just the headlights. However, the roads were cracked and undulating with many utility poles fallen over, so I felt it took a lot more time than usual to reach the village office. The office was littered with shelves, desks and papers with no room to move. So, we set up a temporary disaster response headquarters by taking our desks and whiteboards out into the parking area of the village office. As soon as we set it up, we received information on a lot of collapsed houses and people trapped under the wreckage. Fire station staff and police officers also came running, and I felt as if I were in a war zone.

In Nishihara Village, five people lost their precious lives and a lot of people were injured. The damage came to 505 fully-destroyed houses/buildings, and 1,281 half- or fully-destroyed houses/buildings, accounting for 45% of the total. This made the earthquake an unprecedented disaster.



Damage in Okirihata

2 Activities of the volunteer fire corps

In our village with the “Futagawa Fault,” a “disaster response-type disaster prevention drill” which simulates a major earthquake, hosted by the volunteer fire corps and the village government, is held every two years. All areas in our village are subject to this drill, in which local volunteer fire corps members and voluntary disaster prevention organizations take the initiative to confirm safety and provide evacuation guidance for local residents, as well as reporting damage and personnel to the disaster response headquarters set up in the village office. At the drill in August last year, a combination of rescue training from a collapsed house using special equipment including a chainsaw, and response training which simulated an isolated settlement was provided.



Removal of rubble

This earthquake with “a seismic intensity of 7” exceeded our simulation, and the damage was also severe beyond our expectations. In these circumstances, members of the local volunteer fire corps conveyed information accurately and promptly to the disaster response headquarters to complete the safety confirmation for all local residents before dawn. In addition, although a lot of persons were trapped under the wreckage of collapsed houses, members of the volunteer fire corps saved many lives. This could not have been done by anybody other than the volunteer fire corps members who completely understood each member of each individual family, right up to where they usually slept.

I suppose it was the fruit of the regular training drills and community-based volunteer fire corps activities that meant the damage could be minimized in such a large earthquake.

The volunteer fire corps were involved in a diverse range of activities after their initial rescues such as removal of rubble, temporary restoration of roads, and operation of evacuation centers. Days after the Earthquake, we received information on prowlers, including thieves who were sneaking into empty houses whose inhabitants had evacuated, so we also loaded up cars and conducted night-time security activities. Although the volunteer fire

corps members were also victims, they continued their activities both night and day. There were 4,349 dispatched personnel in total.

3 Future challenges

There was a lot of damage to the fire facilities. Many parts of the fire cisterns were damaged, so a shortage of water to use in the event of a fire is a concern. The volunteer fire corps station and garage were also damaged, so there are many unusable areas. Even now, a small pump-mounted vehicle is still left exposed to the weather. This may affect future volunteer fire corps activities, so early restoration is needed. However, this requires not just the village budget but also means more expense for the residents. It is difficult to place another burden on the residents who are giving their all to rebuild their lives. Therefore, we are unable to make any predictions.

4 Conclusion

After the Earthquake, members of the volunteer fire corps carried out activities with a strong will to “Protect our village ourselves.” As the Chief, once again I was able to feel proud of them.

The activities of Nishihara Village volunteer fire corps appeared on television and in the newspapers. We got a lot of cheers and encouragement from other volunteer fire corps members all over the country, saying they were impressed by our activities. The cheers and encouragement from like-minded peers all over the country offered mental and spiritual sustenance to our exhausted members and provide fuel for our activities. I would like to take this opportunity to express my deepest appreciation.

Our future course toward recovery and reconstruction will be far from easy, but as the Nishihara Village volunteer fire corps, we will forge ahead toward them working together with the residents. We would be grateful if you would continue to warmly watch over us.

