

Reconstruction Design Council Recommends Means of Rebuilding Northeastern Japan Areas Hit by Disasters

The Reconstruction Design Council, an advisory panel to Prime Minister Naoto Kan, submitted a report on a set of recommendations on June 25 blueprinting how to rebuild areas in northeastern Japan devastated by the March 11 earthquake and tsunami.

In this connection, Dr. Makoto Iokibe, Chairman of the Council, Dr. Takashi Mikuriya, Vice-Chairman of the Council, and Dr. Jun Iio, Chairman of the Study Group of the Council, gave a briefing for the foreign press at Foreign Press Center Japan. Following is a summary of the brief.

1. Overview of Recommendations

The Council was set up under a cabinet decision on April 11, one month after the Great East Japan Earthquake, and met 12 times during the 75-day period that followed. Heated discussions ensued, sometimes drawn out to well over six hours per session. The Council obtained a firm legal base on June 24, the day before the submission of its recommendations, as the basic act on Great East Japan Earthquake Reconstruction passed the National Diet.

The disaster drew massive amounts of relief money as well as volunteer activities from across Japan. At the same time, Japan received assistance on an unprecedented scale from around the world, including rescue teams from 28 countries and a whole variety of aid from 135 countries. Members of the Council, who are very appreciative of the global assistance, had intended to write a report envisioning reconstruction both responsive to the goodwill of the world and open, not closed, to global participation.

Dr. Iokibe stated, “The reality of the disaster is catastrophic. However, the history of Japan shows time and again that the country has been devastated by disasters only to bounce back with formidable power of reconstruction, displaying a very strong degree of resilience. Such clout of rebirth ought to happen again. That is what people in stricken areas would want. The spirit underlying the report is that the entire people of Japan, rallying around the Government, are going to support just such resilient power.”

2. Framework & Intention of Recommendations

The report begins with “Seven Principles for the Reconstruction Framework.” The

seven principles were decided during meetings in May and served as guiding principles of the discussions.

The report has a Prologue portion that really is a simple narrative of how the disaster took place, what it means in a historical perspective and how Japan should rise again from the disaster. The keyword threading through the entire report is the word “linkage” to other people and things. “It is linkage among people, communities, in and outside communities, and countries. The preface makes it a point that hope arises from pursuing linkage”, Dr. Iokibe added.

3. Key Points of Report

(1) Concept of “Disaster Reduction” (See page 9 of the Attachment)

The Council introduced the idea of “disaster reduction”. It calls for a fundamental change in the disaster-related policymaking in Japan. It urges a revision of what was previously called disaster prevention, a policy to seek to avoid disaster damage altogether. It boils down to a new policy to prevent ordinary disasters and to take new measures to deal with extraordinary disasters too big to prevent. The report, for example, calls for a change from depending too much on seawalls to evacuation when a major disaster hits, or a change to a combined policy of conducting routine evacuation drills and keeping evacuation roads in good condition. “In the Great East Japan Earthquake, many people died thinking that with seawalls it would not be necessary to flee from the tsunami”, Dr. Iokibe said. Its recommendations also include controlled use of land to avoid living in areas vulnerable to tsunami.

(2) Municipality-led reconstruction (See page 15 of the Attachment)

The report defines the basic concept of having cities, towns and villages take initiatives in reconstruction, urging local people to talk among themselves and decide on the future of their communities.

(3) Legal Framework to Address Tsunami Disaster (See page 17 of the Attachment)

The report calls for the introduction of a new legal framework to deal with the last tsunami disaster as well as tsunami anticipated in future. Moreover, it proposes that administrative procedures, which can be time-consuming at times, be simplified and made into a one-stop-shopping process.

(4) Rehabilitation of Agriculture & Fisheries (See page 25 of the Attachment)

The report recommends measures to rehabilitate agriculture and fisheries as new competitive industries provided that local communities agree to accept the measures.

The report calls for a framework in which agriculture and fisheries are rehabilitated as new industries instead of restoring them just as they used to be.

(5) Renewable Energy (See page 30 of the Attachment)

The report urges rigorous promotion of the use of renewable energy. It calls for the experimental introduction of a framework for the efficient and prompt installation of new energy systems as the Tohoku region proceeds with the reconstruction of local communities.

(6) Stabilization of Electric Power Supply (See page 37 of the Attachment)

The report urges the stabilization of Japan's power supply by next year at the latest.

(7) Towards Recovery from Nuclear Disaster (See page 34 of the Attachment)

Dr. Iokibe emphasized that this part of the report is of a special nature. "A separate Government panel is discussing the issue. It is extremely difficult to consider reconstruction in the future as the situation has yet to stabilize. But measures for reconstruction are described in fine detail in the hope that the area will not fail to recover. What is important is the manifestation of strong resolve to continue supporting reconstruction there. The public should understand that this disaster will not truly have come to a conclusion until Fukushima recovers."

(8) Open Reconstruction (See page 40 of the Attachment)

The report calls for post-disaster reconstruction that is open to the world, firmly determined to keep a free trade system in which reconstruction will be carried out. The report is based on the premise that foreign countries are welcome to join in reconstruction projects, exercising their ingenuity.

4. Funding for Reconstruction

Dr. Iokibe explained his views on funding for reconstruction and the usage of relief money as follows: "To begin with, government bonds will be issued for the private sector to purchase, providing funds necessary for reconstruction. It is important that new government debt be paid back at an early date and the only way to do is through taxation. There are many other ways to follow; Raising donations is one and investment is another. As demand stemming from reconstruction will get into full swing toward autumn, it is necessary to recover some of the restoration cost from the general public by way of taxation. The fiscal condition is quite safe as long as the cost is financed by sound private sector and it is repaid in a sincere manner."

“Relief money amounting to some 250 billion yen is basically meant to be given to disaster victims. But some of the donations may be spent for other purposes, such as scholarship programs for children who lost their parents and, as called for in the report, construction of community forests and hills built in memory of the victims with the rubble left by the disaster.”

5. Time Frame for Implementing Recommendations

With regard to the implementation of the report, Dr. Iio expressed the Council’s expectation as follows: “Upon receiving the report, the Government will come up with its basic policy by the end of July. Basic work on a full-scale supplementary budget and necessary legislation is expected to be completed by this autumn and put into place. Work will begin in the fall and restoration will start wherever reconstruction projects are completed. Rubble will be removed in parallel with reconstruction work and this is expected to be finished in two years. Temporary residential houses still have some difficult problems, but they will be resolved as much as possible in three years. It is the Council’s fundamental thinking to finish basic reconstruction in five to six years, including restoration of the industrial infrastructure. The Council has mapped out very ambitious reconstruction plans, some of which may take 10 years to complete.”

Attachment: “Towards Reconstruction”, Report to the Prime Minister of the Reconstruction Design Council in response to the Great East Japan Earthquake

(End)