

OBI Relief Worker: Situation in Japan 'Sinister'

The Christian Broadcasting Network's Operation Blessing International is in the Sendai area of Japan distributing food and water.

David Darg, OBI's director of international disaster relief and special projects, drove from Tokyo to Sendai on Tuesday, a journey made all the more perilous by the nuclear radiation. He writes about his experiences in his latest blog.

Tuesday, March 15

Every disaster presents residual danger for relief teams. In the Middle East during wartime, the OB team had to work with the danger of unexploded ordinance. After the China quake in 2008, there was the danger of the "Quake Lakes" that were building up and threatening to drown the disaster zone and in many places the threat of diseases such as Cholera can endanger the lives of the aid workers sent in to provide assistance. Having responded to many disasters, I have been in dangerous situations many times but none so sinister as what we are experiencing in Japan today.

The threat of nuclear contamination has gripped the nation with fear. Radiation is an invisible killer and with conflicting reports of just how bad the situation really is there has been a hysteria unlike anything I have ever seen before. Tokyo, a city commonly depicted by it's crowded streets and neon lights, was practically a ghost town yesterday cast in darkness in some parts from rolling blackouts. The few people on the streets were scurrying to search for supplies, but by yesterday morning most food supplies had already gone.

Operation Blessing was fortunate to secure a large amount of

food and water from a wholesale store before things became too scarce and as we went to supermarkets to look for additional supplies I saw empty shelves everywhere. Anything of any nutritional value was gone, there was an elderly lady slowly pushing a cart past an empty bread section and all she had in her cart were candies and a few rice snacks. People have been buying up everything they can get their hands on in fear that they could be confined in their homes after a nuclear meltdown. That hoarding of goods is understandable but the government has been begging people in Tokyo not to do it, because supplies are needed so badly in the North. Fuel is a major problem with horrendous lines of cars waiting for gas. With our tank running low I had to walk into a gas station with a jerrycan and beg. I was told "no" over and over again by the attendant, but I persisted and he gave in to get me out of the way.

In countries where OB does not have an office we rely on a network of strategic partners and contacts to identify "fixers" to help us get established. I was fortunate to have been introduced to a second generation missionary, Don Thompson, who has lived in Japan all his life and speaks the language like a local. I marveled at his ability to navigate the mind-boggling maze of narrow streets in Tokyo.

"The city was designed so that invading armies would get lost when trying to reach the imperial palace," Don told me as we squeezed his van down a narrow side road. With Don's local knowledge and language skills we were able to find some of the last dwindling supplies of bottled water in Tokyo.

We started to head North towards the epicenter and as we were choosing our route news of yet another reactor explosion made it very clear that we had to steer clear of that area. We were able to secure permission from the police to travel on the main highway that runs up the island. It has been closed to all traffic except military and emergency personnel and was a straight shot up to Sendai and the epicenter. Even better was

that it had plenty of gas stations still full and available for us to use. We listened to the radio to try and get updates on the nuclear situation and at one point on the journey we were parallel to the reactors only 60km to the east of us. It was and still is very nerve wracking, but we were still relatively far from the 30km exclusion zone and from what we can tell there has not yet been any "meltdown" that would threaten life beyond that area.

As we headed north, the road became worse and worse where the quake had buckled it so it became slow going after a while. To make matters worse, as we approached Sendai it started to snow.

With freezing temperatures the chances of finding more survivors in the wreckage of the destroyed towns and cities is very slim. As we pulled into Sandai in the freezing darkness there was little sign of life other than one closed gas station with a line of cars over a mile long waiting for it to reopen in the morning. We had planned to sleep in the van but with the cold Don decided to search for some friends that he knew in the city. We found them all staying at their grandmother's house. They welcomed us in, surprised and happy to see Don.

The grandmother's home was in a part of the city that was hit badly by the quake, but spared from the tsunami and when we arrived the electricity was working in the neighborhood! The family told us about the horror of the quake and tsunami, the wife hasn't been able to contact her sister and suspects that she was swept away by the water. As we talked suddenly there was a huge aftershock. The family looked nervous but remained calm, I could see fear on the faces of the children, the uncertainty of what could happen next is hanging heavy over all of the survivors. After about 30 minutes the power went out and exhausted from my jetlag I crashed.

I'm writing this at around 5:00 a.m. I was wakened at 4:00

a.m. by another strong aftershock. They seem to happen at least every three hours with numerous tremors in between. We are getting ready to head out of Sandai, north to towns that were obliterated by the tsunami. Hundreds of thousands of people are now displaced and living in shelters and in just a few hours Operation Blessing will be delivering vital relief supplies to many victims of this disaster and working with local church volunteers to make it happen. Please continue to pray for our safety and for strength for the team. As the true scale of this disaster unfolds, we are realizing just how important it is that the world stands with Japan and supports the relief effort.