

Triple Threat Hangs Over Response Teams in Japan

Experts are already predicting that the devastating earthquake and tsunami in Japan will rank among the most costly natural disasters on record.

Three days later, officials struggled to deal with the dead, hospitals ran out of medicine, and entire communities in the hardest-hit areas remained completely silent. Peter Howard with Food For the Hungry (FH) says, "It's a modern country, so this is unparalleled for the scale of this disaster in a modern country. People are without food and without shelter. The Japanese emergency services are moving very quickly, along with the Japanese military. The U.S. military is heavily engaged, so it's really an international partnership on a large scale."

Millions are without shelter, food, water or heat today, heading into yet another night in near-zero degree temperatures. "We like to take the cues from our local partners," says Howard. "There are typical things that we do in a response like this, and that's helping people get shelter, food and basic non-food items like hygiene kits or kitchen kits."

Howard says, "Minutes ago, I got another e-mail from our partner who's directing the relief response. That's the issue that she brought up—trying to get warm clothing into this community right near Fukushima nuclear plant." Temperatures are dropping to 1 degree C (34 F) at night. FH managed to get two trucks sent out bearing some of the needed emergency supplies.

The nuclear threat hangs heavily as survivors watch the damaged power plants continue to belch smoke and dust. Howard

says, "Several of those have started to have explosions which are releasing some nuclear material into the air, and that's causing great concern in the region. That's the issue that they keep bringing up as one of their biggest concerns and fears."

Fuel rods at Fukushima Dai-ichi have been exposed, and that raises the threat of a meltdown in the wake of a massive explosion that tore through the building housing a different reactor.

Roads are impassible in some areas, and fuel is a precious commodity. The lack of communications has also interfered with planning their response. "Not being able to get fuel in cars, or getting on trains to be able to get to different meetings so that they can coordinate, are just some of the things involved," Howard explains. "Landlines are down and phone calls aren't going through, so communication has been extremely difficult. That does slow everything down as far as getting supplies in and coordination."

Yet Howard says their team is coordinating a plan that flexes with the needs: "For Food for the Hungry, our niche is really working with the local churches and local church partners throughout the region affected and trying to get supplies in through those churches and basically provide support through those churches and ministries."

In fact, many churches are opening their doors to receive the survivors. "We believe that the church is God's vehicle for spreading the Gospel of love and compassion and the message of peace," says Howard. "We're really hopeful that the Japanese church supported by churches all around the world will rise up and truly show what Christians are all about."