

Poor Kobe quake victims fall through cracks

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by Uchihashi Katsuto

All my siblings were born and raised on the same tiny patch of land in Kobe, and it was there that we performed a memorial service for our father and mother long ago.

The house where I was born narrowly survived two major air raids by American forces during World War II, but the ownership of the land fell into the hands of someone outside the family amid the great confusion over claims on assets immediately after the war. The piece of land has since become the parking lot for the neighboring house.

The brick wall, which was certainly there until the day of the furious earthquake, is gone, as are the persimmon tree, the rose of Sharon and the fig. The place now appears to be floating in a freezing winter rain.

On that winter morning, my stepmother narrowly escaped death by folding her body into the small space under a desk, after which she left the devastated city for Tokyo. She refuses to see the Kobe of today and keeps her hometown's old self untouched in her memory. Since she began to live in Tokyo, she has never received any word from the municipal government. The old woman remains cut off, far from her home.

The voices of the small minority of really vulnerable quake survivors are being drowned out. Recovery is visible, but the losses are not.

In its coverage of the areas hit by the Indian Ocean tsunami, the media has picked up a number of gruesome stories about orphaned children in danger of becoming victims of human trafficking. There are always people eager to take advantage of the misery of others.

In disaster zones across this nation, the wicked have descended on the weak. Take for example the so-called system lenders, predatory lenders who typically provide immediate, no-questions-asked loans at exorbitant interest rates, mainly to small businesses, in return for their bills and checks, and black-market lenders who take annuity certificates as collateral.

The suicide rates in the three hardest-hit wards of Kobe-Hyogo, Nagata and Nada-are still far higher than elsewhere in Japan. What does that fact tell us?

A natural disaster often reveals the innermost nature of a society. It makes clear whether the society really cares about its people or places the highest value on something else.

Right after the quake, a slogan became popular: "Relief instead of rebuke." That accurately reflected the attitude of the time.

Ten years after the big tremor, however, it is now necessary to rigorously scrutinize and evaluate the responses of the central and local governments to the damage caused by the disaster. How did then Kobe Mayor Kazutoshi Sasayama deal with the reconstruction of the city? What has the state done to help Kobe?

Many people say proudly that the city has

recovered fully from the devastation. In my view, though, neither the city of Kobe nor its economy has really revived. The effects of the quake disaster are still felt.

Only a quarter of the several trillion yen the central government earmarked for Kobe's rehabilitation was spent on aid to the victims struggling to rebuild their lives.

Similarly, Hyogo Prefecture used a mere 12-13 percent of its over-4-trillion-yen Kobe reconstruction budget to support the victims. And much of the support was provided in the form of loans.

The city of Kobe set aside less than 7 percent of its more than 2.7 trillion yen of recovery expenditures to ease the plight of its citizens. (The data come from central and local government sources.)

It was five years before all those placed in temporary housing had found somewhere to live. The authorities have maintained that public money cannot be used to compensate individual citizens for loss of personal assets, like houses, caused by the temblor.

The voices of the most vulnerable few survivors go unheeded by policy-makers, who are

obsessed with arguments for reform and self-reliance.

Nearly 500 people have died alone in temporary housing or new public housing for quake survivors. More than 120 families, mostly made up of old people and the unemployed, have been evicted from the new public housing, including apartments run by the Kobe municipal government, because they failed to pay the rent.

Homeless people across the nation shelter themselves from the elements with the blue tents that were once used in Kobe. Scenes reminiscent of the city immediately after the 1995 tremor are popping up in many parts of the nation.

An economic superpower and a lifestyle superpower thrive on different values. It is hard to believe the political choices behind the policy responses to the epic earthquake, which clearly reflect the values of an economic superpower, will ever bring the happiness of living in a lifestyle superpower to the people of Japan in the 21st century.

Uchihashi Katsuto is an economic critic. This comment appeared in the IHT/Asahi Shimbun, January 22, 2005.