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Damage keeps Japanese church officials from assessing needs

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A fire burns amid houses that were swept away by a tsunami in Natori, Japan, March 11. (CNS photo/Reuters/Kyodo)

TOKYO -- Damage from a magnitude 8.9 earthquake and ensuing tsunamis were preventing church officials in Japan from assessing needs as tsunami warnings were issued for 50 other countries and territories.

Yasufumi Matsukuma, a staffer at the Japanese bishops' conference, told the Asian church news agency UCA News that most staffers would remain in the offices overnight because of suspended rail service and continuous aftershocks.

"In Tokyo, telephone lines are so busy that I cannot contact diocesan chancellor offices in Japan. Aftershocks have followed. The tsunamis are terrible and we cannot get any information concerning the church yet," he said.

Disruption of telecommunications has made it impossible for the conference's general secretariat to contact Sendai, near the quake's epicenter, and neighboring dioceses, he added.

Television and web video showed cars, ships and even buildings being swept away by a wall of water hitting Sendai, and CNN reported police discovered at least 200-300 bodies in the city. Initial reports from the Kyodo News Agency indicated 137 killed in the quake and tsunami, 539 injured and more than 350 missing, but those numbers were expected to increase.

Daisuke Narui, executive director of Caritas Japan, said in a statement: "We are still collecting information at this point, but currently we are not able to communicate on the phone. Cell phones are also out of service."

Father Koichi Otaki of the Diocese of Niigata told Fides, the news agency of the Vatican's Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples: "A tsunami has hit our people ... a tidal wave has come to overwhelm our lives. We are still in shock over what has happened."

He said the diocese most affected was Sendai. The priest added that Niigata Bishop Tarcisius Isao Kikuchi, president of Caritas Japan, said even though the Catholic community in the country was very small, "we will not walk away from our commitment and our solidarity with the victims."

A spokeswoman for Catholic Relief Services said the agency was on high alert in many countries in Asia, including the Philippines and Caritas Oceania, which is active in many islands in the Pacific.

This earthquake is the strongest since a magnitude 9.1 quake struck off Indonesia in December 2004. The quake and the tsunamis that followed left about 220,000 people dead or missing in more than a dozen countries around the Indian Ocean.

"We know from 2004 the devastating impact that these tsunamis can have," said Sean Callahan, CRS executive vice president for overseas operations. "As with all such disasters, CRS will help people recover from the emergency and stand with them as they recover."

Tsunamis also hit Hawaii and the West Coast of the United States.

Twitter feeds from the Diocese of Honolulu indicated most schools were closed. One tweet read: "St. Stephen Diocesan Center is open if anyone needs to get to higher ground. Please be safe."

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