

Japanese bishops to set up center to coordinate operations

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ROME -- Japanese church officials are setting up an emergency center to coordinate humanitarian aid operations in Sendai, the area most devastated by the March 11 earthquake and tsunami.

The center will be managed by Caritas Japan and will draw on the resources of numerous Catholic volunteers who have come forward in the wake of the disaster, the Vatican missionary news agency Fides reported.

Japan's bishops, meeting in Sendai March 16, decided to establish the center and initiate additional relief efforts under the supervision of Caritas.

"The biggest buildings in Sendai withstood the very strong earthquake. The greatest damage was caused by the tsunami. The panorama of destruction is striking. Now we'll have to roll up our shirt sleeves. People are expecting our help," said Fr. Daisuke Narui, executive director of Caritas Japan.



Narui said he was encouraged by the enthusiasm of Japanese youth offering to help the displaced.

"Young people are continually coming to Caritas from all the dioceses to offer their availability as volunteers to bring aid to the areas most affected by the disaster," the priest told Fides. "This is an important sign that gives us hope for the future."

"Today the dominant feeling is fear," Narui said. "The biggest concern is that of the nuclear power plant in Fukushima. It is a ghost from Japanese history coming back to haunt us. But it must be said that the people are not indulging in panic; instead, they are reacting with poise and dignity."

He said although many people had been evacuated and others were being asked to stay in their homes, "in the worst-affected areas the main problem is the lack of food and fuel. As there is no fuel, people cannot move. And they are left feeling powerless in the face of this tragedy."

After the magnitude 9 earthquake, reactors at the Fukushima plant were hit by explosions, and Japanese officials were working to avoid leakage of radiation. They ordered evacuations for hundreds of thousands of people.

Earlier, Bishop Martin Tetsuo Hiraga of Sendai told Vatican Radio that many area residents, cut off without electricity and with some phone service just restored, were unaware of the worsening situation at the Fukushima plant.

"You living in other countries have a much better idea of the tragedy," the bishop told Vatican Radio.

"We are terrified," the bishop said. "We only have the government announcements, we have no other source of information. We don't even know what has happened to our parishes in the towns and villages along the coast. We have no way of contacting them. I can only hope that the people of my diocese can stand together and be strong enough to overcome this disaster."

Japanese officials estimate about 10,000 people died in the disaster.

Editor's Note: For CNS photos of the continuing disaster in Japan, see the slideshow below.

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