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Catholics step up Japanese earthquake response

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TOKYO -- A group of Brazilian citizens living in Japan launched efforts to help victims of what Japanese media are calling the Great East Japan Earthquake.

Thirty representatives from 60 Brazilian organizations formed Brazil Solidarity in an effort to coordinate aid distribution, rubble removal and support services for hundreds of thousands of victims in the region of northeast Japan affected by the quake.

Carlos Shinoda, 55, a Catholic and head of a school for Brazilians in Nagoya, Japan, is the leader of the new organization. He also is president of the Council of Representatives of Brazilians Abroad living in Japan.

Brazil Solidarity first met in late March with the help of Marcos Bezerra Abbott Galvao, Brazil's ambassador to Japan, and Brazilian business owners, Shinoda said.

"We decided to purchase relief materials and bring them to disaster areas, an effort financed by Brazilian companies through the embassy of Brazil," Shinoda explained. "At present, our intention is to deliver 450 bicycles to Sendai. Joined by Ambassador Galvao, we also plan to offer our service as volunteers there."

The group planned to develop a website to provide information on its activities and to offer suggestions on how Brazilians living in Japan can help.

The formation of the new group came on the heels of an the effort by another Catholic, Shinji Mogi, 46, who twice has transported heavy equipment from his firm in Fujisawa in Kanagawa prefecture to assist in clearing rubble.

"Our main thought was just to do whatever we could to help, so we took a GPS navigation system and went as far as we could go," Mogi said. "We made it to a place where the tsunami had hit really hard, so we used the backhoe to do things like remove piles of timber for those who were out searching for their families."

In southern Vietnam, Catholics in 200 local churches began collecting funds and offered spiritual support for quake victims. The campaign will continue through Easter and will benefit Caritas Japan, the church's relief agency.

Cardinal Jean-Baptiste Pham Minh Man said the Catholic Church in Japan has provided support for the Vietnamese Catholics in the past so "it is time we expressed our solidarity and gratitude to our friends."

Bishop Martin Tetsuo Hiraga of Sendai, Japan, thanked Catholics around the world for their contributions to the earthquake relief effort, the Vatican's missionary news agency Fides reported April 6.

"The aid will help us to rise again after this tragedy," Bishop Hiraga said.

The Vatican announced that it will donate the collection from a Mass to be celebrated by Pope Benedict XVI on

Holy Thursday to Japanese earthquake and tsunami victims.

Bishop Hiraga also acknowledged a $150,000 contribution from the Pontifical Council Cor Unum that recently arrived in the hard-hit diocese.

"This money will be used to help people in need to repair churches and to rebuild homes," he said.

In Sendai, the Center of Solidarity Institute of Caritas Japan sent about 80 volunteers to four locations in the quake zone to work with local authorities, Fides reported.

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