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Japanese mark six months since disasters

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TOKYO -- The church bell tolled at 2:46 p.m., marking six months since the March 11 earthquake and tsunami in eastern Japan.

Throughout the nation Sept. 11, Japanese gathered for memorial services and to offer prayers for the more than 20,000 people who died and the hundreds of thousands made homeless in the disaster, which also triggered a nuclear meltdown.

The Japanese bishops' conference and the National Christian Council in Japan conducted a joint memorial service at the United Church of Christ's Shitaya Church. Approximately 180 people gathered for the service, which also had the support of the Japan Evangelical Association, reported the Asian church news agency UCA News.

The congregation offered prayers in memory of the victims, for the recovery of the worst-affected regions, and for a swift resolution to the nuclear crisis that arose in the wake of the tragedy.UCA News reported that Archbishop Peter Takeo Okada of Tokyo participated.

During the ecumenical gathering, Isao Tadokoro of Caritas Japan gave a short account of the Catholic Church's relief work in the disaster area.

Similar memorials for the dead and prayers for renewal in the disaster-struck areas were conducted throughout Japan.

The president of the bishops' conference, Archbishop Leo Jun Ikenaga of Osaka, composed texts for the prayer of the faithful to be offered on the occasion. He urged all bishops to use them during the Sept. 11 Masses, UCA News reported.

Also Sept. 11, Bishop Martin Tetsuo Hiraga of Sendai, which was among the hardest-hit regions by the disaster, released a document, "Moving Into Phase II of the 'New Creation' Basic Plan" -- an update on policies he first issued around Easter.

In the new document, Bishop Hiraga looked back on activities of the church over the past six months as "Phase I" and proclaimed the next year-and-a-half as "Phase II." His plan for Phase II includes rebuilding the lives of victims, assisting in re-establishing their economic independence, caring for those who have suffered psychological damage and re-establishing communities.

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