

July 2020 Heavy Rain Disaster Area Survey



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Even as the COVID-19 outbreak spread, warm and humid air continued to flow into western and eastern Japan from July 3 to July 31 due to the stagnant weather front, causing heavy rains. Kyushu in particular was hit with record-setting heavy rains from the 4th to the 7th. These heavy rains caused floods in Kuma River and Chikugo River. Kochi, Nagano, and Gifu Prefectures were among some of the areas throughout Japan that suffered flooding, landslides, and lowland inundation.

In Kumamoto Prefecture in particular, 65 lives were lost, and two people are still missing (as of October 2020). According to the Kumamoto Prefectural Government, 8,881 residential buildings were damaged, forcing victims to live in evacuation shelters, temporary housing, publicly funded post-disaster rental accommodations, and home shelters.

On October 19 and 20, the Shafuku Saigai Student Volunteer Group from Kumamoto Gakuen University accompanied us during our visit to Hitoyoshi City and Kuma Village in Kumamoto. The Shafuku Saigai Student Volunteer Group was comprised primarily of students from Hitoyoshi who began supporting activities immediately following the disaster. From the beginning, they had been involved in shoveling mud left by the rain, delivering ready-made vegetable soup to victims in their homes, and enquiring about their current conditions. The group currently continues to give support to home evacuees, while also

interviewing seniors in newly established temporary housing and running the Aozora Tea Meetup on site. Representative volunteer Shota Yamakita explains that there are not only fewer regular volunteers compared to the time following the Kumamoto earthquake, but also fewer student volunteers. Since students have seen a sharp drop in their income from part-time work due to COVID-19, the issue is that they cannot afford to participate in volunteer activities. Therefore, if students wish to volunteer, this volunteer group supports the students by using donations and subsidies to pay for



▲ The Aozora Tea Meetup on site (taken on October 20, 2020)

lunch and purchase essential materials such as rubber boots, securing volunteer participation by reducing the burden on students. They set up a tent in a corner of the temporary housing area, and when the students went around approaching residents about having a tea meetup, the residents gradually started to come out. They got to know each other by talking about where they had lived before and sharing stories about their experiences in a flood 50 years ago. One resident cooked deer meat and brought it to the meetup for tasting. The resident said, “The pressure cooker I used to have was swept away in the flood. It would have been easier to make this stew if I had had that.” To this another victim said, “When I was cleaning up things from the flood, I even threw out things that hadn’t been submerged in water, thinking I didn’t need any of it, but now I often think about things I should’ve kept.” I have heard similar conversations in other disaster-stricken areas in the past. In the chaos that immediately follow a disaster, people start with a mind to clean up as quickly as possible and end up throwing everything away, but I imagine they might start to have these second thoughts after they move into temporary housing and life calms down a bit.

Currently, there are often times when assembly areas made at the temporary housing cannot be used in order to stop the spread of COVID-19. Hence, the tea meetups at the temporary housing have become opportunities for residents to not only interact with young students, but also get to know one another. Hideaki Takabayashi, a professor at the Faculty of Social Welfare who was in charge of the volunteer group, and volunteer leader Shota Yamakita are both scheduled to attend our Revitalization and Disaster Reduction Forum in January.

The next place we visited was the village of Kuma. The Konose district is very isolated from Hitoyoshi, and it had been a community of 204 households before the disaster. However, most victims currently continue to live in an evacuation shelter at a closed school over an hour away,

and those who do not are living in other temporary housing. Every Saturday, the district's Recovery Committee holds a meeting, which began when area residents began to think about the revitalization of the area. I think that the opportunity for those who have returned to the area and for victims currently living in various accommodations, such as evacuation shelters and temporary housing, to think about the future of their village together will be a big step toward revitalization.



▲Affected houses along the Kuma River (photo taken on October 20, 2020)

While many volunteers and support groups hesitate to go to the sites due to COVID-19, support groups and people with knowledge and expertise of previous disaster areas do enter the sites albeit in small numbers and have been making real efforts together with local people. COVID-19 should not mean that the lessons and wisdom cultivated in previous disaster areas are not passed on to others; I profoundly felt the necessity of thinking about how to support victims even with the COVID crisis and build systems of support.

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