

# The Role of Self-Defense Forces (SDF) in Responding to the Great East Japan Earthquake

*Ryoichi Oriki*<sup>1</sup>

It is a great honor for me to speak to everyone as the keynote speaker at this symposium today. Let me begin by expressing my sincere gratitude to those who have come from overseas, for the outpouring of support that Japan received from countries across the world in the wake of the Great East Japan Earthquake. The theme of this symposium is “the military’s role in disaster relief operations.” I would like to speak about the role that the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (SDF) played as responders to the Great East Japan Earthquake, based on my perspective as the Chief of Joint Staff of the SDF which took part in the operations.

## **Positioning of the SDF during Peacetime**

Before I discuss the role of the SDF, let me first touch on the matter of how the SDF is positioned in Japan. Under Japanese law, the Ministry of Defense (MOD) and the SDF form an organization for national defense. “Ministry of Defense” refers to the administrative aspects of the organization, whereas “SDF” refers to the operational aspects of the organization whose mission is the defense of Japan. Based on Japan’s past historical experience and Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, the mission and authority of the SDF are limited compared to the militaries of other countries. The primary mission of the SDF is to defend Japan from a direct and indirect invasion. As the security environment changes and peoples’ expectations of the SDF increase, however, the mission of the SDF, while in principle is the defense of Japan, has expanded and diversified to include international peace cooperation and other operations.

## **Positioning of the SDF in Disaster Response**

Disaster relief operations are a critical mission of the SDF particularly in

---

<sup>1</sup> (Then) Chief of Staff, Joint Staff Office, JSDF.

Japan, where earthquakes, typhoons, and other natural disasters occur frequently. Although the annual number of disaster relief deployments has been declining every year, the SDF was deployed as many as around 550 times in FY2009 and around 400 times in FY2010. There are three ways in which the SDF responds to disasters: dispatches upon request (general form of disaster relief dispatch); earthquake disaster relief dispatch; and nuclear disaster dispatch. The Self-Defense Force Act sets forth the authority granted to SDF personnel to effectively carry out these mandates. In principle, a disaster relief dispatch is carried out at the request of prefectural governors and other officials, excluding cases of particular urgency. When a disaster occurs, the local government becomes the main responder, and the SDF works and cooperates with the local government and other actors to perform disaster relief operations. To date, the SDF has taken part in relief operations in numerous disaster areas by making use of its capabilities, including equipments, organization, and ability to be self-sufficient. The SDF takes preparedness measures even from peacetime. In addition to formulating disaster relief plans and improving response capabilities through disaster prevention drills, the SDF participates in local government disaster prevention drills and has boosted its coordination with local governments, including the enhancement of coordination arrangements and alignment of disaster management plans. It was amidst these efforts that the Great East Japan Earthquake struck off the coast of Sanriku on March 11, 2011, leading to concerted efforts by the SDF in response to the disaster.

### **Attributes of the Great East Japan Earthquake**

If there is one aspect that sets the Great East Japan Earthquake apart from other natural disasters, it is the fact that the earthquake was the largest recorded earthquake in the history of Japan—magnitude 9.0 on the Richter scale and the maximum 7 on the Japanese seismic intensity scale. Due to the immense scale of the earthquake, the affected districts were spread over a wide area from the Tohoku to Kanto regions. In addition, a tsunami measuring as high as 16m devastated the coastal areas. The catastrophic damage left many local governments unable to function, and an accident occurred at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station of Tokyo Electric Power Company. The fact that this was a complex disaster made up of earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear accident is another attribute of the Great East Japan Earthquake. In this disaster, approximately 16,000 people lost their lives, and approximately 4,000

people remain missing.

## **Attributes of the Operations of the SDF**

It was in response to this unprecedented disaster that the SDF carried out its operations. The role that the SDF played was entirely different from all of its preceding disaster relief operations.

To start with, while the SDF normally plays a supporting role in disaster responses, this time the SDF had no choice but to fulfill a central role. Approximately 107,000 SDF personnel were deployed to the disaster area. This is approximately half of the entire SDF force and the largest number ever deployed for a SDF disaster relief mission. A Joint Task Force (JTF) was organized for the first time for a disaster response, and through joint operations, the Ground, Maritime, and Air Self-Defense Forces made unified efforts to cope with both the earthquake and tsunami disaster and the nuclear accident. Those deployed included not only the SDF personnel on standby, but also reserves who were called up to respond for actual operations for the first time. Furthermore, the SDF assumed a portion of the role that other ministries and agencies fulfill, including the transport of bodies and the management of the transport of relief supplies. At the site of the nuclear accident, based on the Prime Minister's instructions, the SDF, for the first time provided a unified response in partnership with the fire department and police and other ministries and agencies, in determining the guidelines for spraying water over the nuclear power station and carrying them out, though they were limited in scope. Further still, through these activities, the SDF was able to fulfill its true role, which is to act without fear when a contingency arises. This role received broad recognition from the Japanese people, and trust in the SDF increased among the public.

Full consideration to coordination with relevant organizations and other actors was given for the implementation of these activities. Measures were taken with a sense of integrity, by acquiring a detailed and sincere understanding of the needs of the affected people and municipalities. The SDF closely coordinated with Government agencies, including the local countermeasures headquarters and relevant ministries and agencies. The SDF also cooperated with the United States (U.S.) forces and other foreign partners.

The SDF dissolved the JTF on July 1, 2011, and on September 9, 2011, concluded the large-scale disaster relief mission in response to the earthquake and

tsunami. However, the nuclear disaster relief mission is still ongoing and is providing decontamination support to those who were able to temporarily return to their homes in Fukushima Prefecture and others.

Next, I would like to speak more specifically on the role that the SDF played in: 1) the response to the earthquake and tsunami; 2) the response to the nuclear disaster; and 3) Japan-U.S. cooperation.

## **Response to the Earthquake and Tsunami**

The SDF played a central role in the response to the earthquake and tsunami by harnessing its capabilities, including its organization and equipment. From the immediate aftermath of the disaster, the SDF made every effort to rescue survivors and made all-out efforts day and night to search for missing people, support the lives of the affected, assist the emergency restoration work, and deal with the nuclear accident. In the area of search and rescue, the SDF rescued approximately 19,000 people—approximately 70% of all people rescued. In the area of transport of relief supplies and other goods, the SDF established a transport scheme, including integrated transportation, which enabled the swift and effective transportation of relief supplies provided from across Japan and their delivery to the affected people. Bearing in mind the needs of the municipalities, the SDF also provided support for the emergency restoration of airports and ports that became unusable due to the earthquake and tsunami. In addition, at the request of municipalities, the SDF transported bodies and conducted burials for the first time due to the reduced functions of the municipalities and private businesses.

In all of our activities, our priority was to offer assistance that was truly wanted by the affected people at that moment. For the distribution of the relief supplies that were collected from around the country, SDF personnel, including female SDF personnel, made door-to-door visits of the evacuation centers to grasp the specific needs of the affected people. A variety of creative efforts were made to ensure that the people did not lack basic needs as much as possible, including water, food, fuel, baths, and sanitation. I believe the SDF was able to execute its mission, all the while seeing through the eyes of the affected people and being attentive to their detailed needs, because of two factors. First, the SDF trained consistently to execute its essential mission—the defense of Japan. Secondly, the SDF had cemented trust with communities and the people through traditional disaster relief missions and

joint disaster drills with municipalities and other stakeholders.

## **Response to the Nuclear Disaster**

At the request of the Government's Nuclear Emergency Response Headquarters, an order to implement a nuclear disaster relief mission was issued to deal with the insufficient cooling of the nuclear reactors at Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station. The mission was headed by the Commander of the Central Readiness Force, and the Central Nuclear Biological Chemical Weapon Defense Unit of the Ground Self-Defense Force (GSDF) played a central role in the response to the situation. While facing the risk of exposure to radiation, SDF personnel exerted great efforts to avert a crisis situation caused by the nuclear accident. In order to cool the nuclear reactors and spent fuel pools, the GSDF's CH-47J helicopters dropped water on the reactors. In addition, together with the fire department and the police, the fire trucks of the GSDF, MSDF, and ASDF sprayed water, injected water, and were on standby in case of emergencies. The SDF worked to decontaminate radioactive material, monitor the air radiation dose as well as changes in the temperature of the nuclear reactor, and assist with the evacuation of the residents living near the nuclear power station. Indeed, I believe this image of SDF personnel taking action without fear epitomizes the role the SDF should fulfill in the national context as "the last line of defense," as the public watches on. Meanwhile, special disasters of this nature require scientific and technological capabilities beyond what we, the SDF, have, and there is a need to increase knowledge and capacity to respond to such disasters. An issue is how Japan, in response to future anticipated special disasters, will systematically pool public and private capabilities and together deal with these disasters.

## **Response through Japan-U.S. Joint Operations**

Another aspect in this disaster which was critical for the SDF was the Japan-U.S. joint operations. The U.S. forces rendered extensive assistance for the recovery of the disaster area—deploying the USS Ronald Reagan Strike Group and carrying out Operation Tomodachi, which deployed approximately 16,000 troops at most under Commander Patrick M. Walsh of the newly organized Joint Support Force (JSF). Furthermore, the U.S. proposed a variety of cooperation initiatives in response to the nuclear disaster, and offered a range of assistances, including the

provision of equipment needed to cool the nuclear reactors, the arrival of experts from the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) to Japan, and the dispatch of the Chemical Biological Incident Response Force (CBIRF) from Washington DC. Coordination between Japan and the U.S. was carried out in accordance with the coordination mechanism stipulated in the Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation. Bilateral coordination centers were established at MOD in Ichigaya, at the headquarters of the U.S. forces in Japan in Yokota, and at the SDF Headquarters of the Northeastern Army in Sendai, at which the JTF was based. The MOD/SDF and the U.S. forces, among other actors, coordinated their operations closely. U.S. Forces Japan Commander Burton M. Field, JSF Commander Walsh, and I shared information and exchanged views almost daily. I was also in contact on a timely basis with U.S. Pacific Command Commander Robert F. Willard, and strove to carry out Japan-U.S. operations based on a shared recognition and vision. As the details of the Japan-U.S. cooperation will be presented in a later session, I will limit myself to providing you just an overview. I would like to say, however, that the operations of the U.S. forces, which made dedicated efforts amidst the crisis situation in Japan, reaffirmed the strong *kizuna* (bonds of friendship) of the Japan-U.S. alliance. Our joint drills and other activities to date benefited the partnership between the SDF and the U.S. forces, and based on our shared lessons learned, we will endeavor to further increase the viability of the bilateral partnership.

## **Boosting Response Capabilities from Peacetime**

I believe the SDF was able to respond to the Great East Japan Earthquake, because it conducted drills and built up the defense force steadfastly from peacetime, keeping in mind situations of armed attacks. In all areas of the disaster response, the SDF's attributes were demonstrated, along with the capabilities of the units and individuals fostered on a daily basis. These attributes of the SDF were highly praised by the Japanese people. The key attributes of the SDF include an ability to organize itself, as well as command and control ability cultivated through daily education and drills, coordination ability, and an exceptional ability to take action. Moving forward, the SDF must continue to improve its readiness and effectiveness to implement all missions from peacetime, including disaster response, and be ready to execute these missions more effectively and appropriately.

We often heard the word “unanticipated” to describe the earthquake, because

the Great East Japan Earthquake was an unprecedented major disaster. It is, however, a fundamental principle of the military to prepare for unforeseen circumstances. Drawing on the experience of the disaster, we must examine more broadly about situations that can occur and set out a vision for responses with a flexible mindset. The SDF is working wholeheartedly to compile the lessons from the earthquake for the organization, as well as to examine structural issues so that the SDF can respond more appropriately in the future. In compiling the lessons learned, our goal is that the lessons contribute not only to future disaster responses but also to boosting response capabilities for all situations, including emergency situations. The lessons extracted so far include many items requiring review, including the joint operational structure (among the GSDF, MSDF, and ASDF), the operation of units, guidelines on information sharing with local countermeasures headquarters and relevant ministries and agencies, and guidelines on cooperation with other countries. We intend to reflect these lessons learned across various areas, including future education and drills, the execution of missions, and the buildup of the defense force, and in turn, strengthen the arrangements to effectively fulfill the diversifying role of the SDF.

## **Reinforcing International Partnerships**

From the immediate aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami disaster, Japan received heartfelt support from countries across the world. Foreign militaries, including the U.S., Australia, the Republic of Korea, Thailand, and Israel, arrived in Japan to provide assistance. They kindly transported relief supplies and personnel and provided medical care. From the swift and organized response of the foreign militaries, I sensed that countries attach importance to the role of the military in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief and that combat-readiness is established in these countries. The security challenges facing today's international community include many challenges which are difficult to tackle by one country alone. Similarly, natural disasters in some cases warrant the assistance of the international community to supplement the response implemented by the affected country. Disaster response is now taken up as an important theme at international conferences. At the request of the affected government or an international organization, SDF units have been deployed in response to overseas disasters and have conducted a number of international emergency relief operations. More recently, the SDF contributed medical support and transported supplies and personnel in response to last year's earthquake in Haiti and

flooding in Pakistan. These activities were highly commended by the international community. Moving forward, it is vital that the SDF is well trained to extend assistance promptly, as well as effectively and efficiently, in response to disasters not only in Japan but also overseas by making use of the attributes of the SDF. The SDF participates in multilateral joint drills, including the Disaster Relief Exercise (DiREx) held under the framework of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). The SDF must continue to conduct simulations of partnerships with other countries through such exercises, and strengthen the arrangements to cooperate with the international community for disaster response when the need arises. I believe the trust which was fostered through the daily defense cooperation and exchanges of MOD and SDF was one of the factors that made this heartfelt military support happen, in addition to the cordial relations between Japan and the countries that existed from peacetime. It is essential that the SDF continue to further solidify cooperation arrangements with other countries and deepen mutual trust in the area of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

## **The Changing Role of the Military**

Today, the role of the military is further diversifying in the context of the international community. As mutual dependency between states further increases and the probability of a large-scale war between major countries decreases on the one hand, the risk of a turmoil in one country or its security issue causing ripple effects across the world has increased dramatically. In addition to the post-Cold War security issues which came into the spotlight, including the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles, international terrorist organizations, piracy activities, and regional conflicts, new security issues have emerged in the spotlight, including the stable use of the maritime, outer space, and cyber space, and climate change. It is extremely difficult for one country alone to deal with these global security issues, and the establishment of partnerships and cooperation with other countries from peacetime is critical. Given this situation, it is becoming a general practice to operate the military force not only to deter and respond to armed conflicts as has traditionally been the case, but also to operate it constantly and continuously from peacetime, including for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, peacekeeping, and anti-piracy efforts. Together with this change in the role of the military force, it is becoming necessary to implement comprehensive responses that are coordinated

with non-military sectors, including diplomatic, police and judiciary, information, and economic.

Amid these trends, the role of the Japanese SDF is also changing. Particularly after the passage of the Act on Measures to Ensure the Peace and Security of Japan in Perilous Situations in Areas Surrounding Japan in 1999, the missions of the SDF have increased, including overseas operations. In 2007, along with the transition from the Defense Agency to the Ministry of Defense, new missions were added to the primary missions of the SDF: international peace cooperation operations; rear area support in response to situations in areas surrounding Japan; the removal of mines and other explosives; and the transport of Japanese nationals overseas and others. In addition, within Japan, the expectations of the SDF toward disaster relief missions are increasing further. As exemplified by the examples of bird flu and foot-and-mouth disease, natural disasters such as flooding caused by climate change, as well as responses to tsunamis and nuclear accidents as in the case of the Great East Japan Earthquake, the nature and scale of disasters are changing. The SDF's responses, while continuing to uphold the three principles of a disaster relief mission—urgency, communality, and non-substitutability—have never been more diverse than they are today.

The new National Defense Program Guidelines which were decided by the Cabinet at the end of 2010 placed focus on the management of Japan's defense force. Specifically, it set out a policy to develop a "dynamic defense force" for proactively engaging in operations in order to effectively fulfill the diversifying role of the defense force. The experience of the Great East Japan Earthquake has reaffirmed that the development of a "dynamic defense force" is an urgent issue for the SDF. With a view to realizing this "dynamic defense force," I believe it is extremely important to increase the readiness, mobility, flexibility, and sustainability of the SDF.

The mission of the SDF is to be "ready for today and prepared for tomorrow" for the nation and the people. To this end, we must, from peacetime, develop strong units that will be able to make maximum use of their personnel, equipment, and other capabilities, and set up a system in which we can use this as the basis for quickly responding in the case of an emergency. It is very significant that views will be exchanged on the theme of "the military's role in disaster relief operations" at the symposium this year—the year that Japan was hit by an unprecedented massive disaster—the Great East Japan Earthquake. I look forward to brainstorming with all of you here today, what sort of organization the SDF should be and what sort of

role it should assume for the nation to be fully prepared. Thank you very much for your attention.