

21 March 2019

## The Japanese Tsunami



**Sir David Warren KCMG** is an expert on Japan, having served three times in the British Embassy in Tokyo from the 1970s to the 2000s, finally as UK Ambassador to Japan (2008-12) before his retirement from the FCO in 2013. At an earlier stage in his career, he also served as Head of the FCO's China Hong Kong Department (in London).

\*\*\*\*\*

*It is eight years this month since an earthquake off the coast of the Tohoku region of Japan triggered powerful tsunami waves that swept through the Japanese mainland causing mass destruction and loss of life. It was the most powerful earthquake ever recorded in Japan and the fourth most powerful earthquake in the world. The tsunami caused reactors in the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant to meltdown with hundreds of thousands of residents having to be evacuated. Sir David Warren was the UK's Ambassador to Japan at this time and gives his insight here as to the role of Ambassador and his embassy staff when this huge natural disaster occurred.*

### **API: Where were you when the earthquake struck, at 2.46 on Friday 11 March 2011?**

I was visiting Nissan in Yokohama, south of Tokyo, on a company call. The earthquake was several hundred miles away to the north. Its force and intensity shook the ground and the buildings with tremendous power – my driver had to manoeuvre the car close to the buildings because he feared that cranes on the roof might detach themselves from their anchors and crash to the ground. I was in shock for about five minutes. Then I realised that I had to head straight back to Tokyo. The journey normally took about forty-five minutes. With the expressway and rail links closed, it took six hours. I walked the last mile. I got back to the Embassy at just before nine in the evening.

### **API: How did the Embassy respond?**

After confirmation that all our staff were safe, we became a Crisis Centre. All normal Embassy work stopped. I became the Crisis Leader. We set up teams – one to oversee consular support, one to gather information from public and private sources, one to handle the media, all overseen by a crisis manager, and working three daily eight-hour shifts, with telephone conferences with the FCO Crisis Centre every four hours, feeding in information and sitreps to the Government's regular COBRA meetings. We were strengthened by over 80 members of three FCO Rapid Deployment Teams, who flew in over that weekend.

### **API: What were your objectives and responsibilities during the crisis?**

There were essentially two crises. The earthquake was the strongest in Japanese history, but the real loss of life was in the tsunami that followed an hour later, which resulted in around 20,000 deaths. Then the first accounts came in of the tsunami knocking out the electricity at the

**Access. Engagement. Resolution.**

Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant south of the epicentre, and from the Saturday afternoon we were dealing with the after-effects of the worst nuclear crisis since Chernobyl.

The Embassy had three responsibilities - consular support for British nationals, travel advice for people in or thinking of travelling to Japan, and liaising with the Japanese authorities in terms of providing assistance. An emergency UK search and rescue team flew into the earthquake zone over the first weekend and we also provided equipment (bottled water, radiation survey instruments etc.)

**API: What were the main challenges as the aftermath of the disaster unfolded?**

An Embassy will be judged on the quality of the assistance it gives to British nationals. Nothing is more important, and any weaknesses or perceived weaknesses will be seized on by the media. At the outset of the crisis, information will be scarce. Most British residents in Japan – a peaceful and stable country – do not register with the British Embassy. We had a general sense that several hundred lived around the area affected by the tsunami, but we were not sure. Early indications of the casualty toll were obvious underestimates. Our warden network was initially uncontactable. We were of course deluged with calls from people worried about loved ones. Such was the volume that the main call handling had to be done in the UK by the Police Casualty Bureau. A database was established which had to be repeatedly checked and counterchecked as individuals phoned in and were confirmed as safe. Social media also helped. It took some time for the picture to become clearer.

The key decision for me was when to deploy to the region. I had spent most of the Saturday overseeing the setting-up of the Crisis Centre. By Saturday evening, the first British correspondents were arriving in the disaster zone. It was clear that I needed to deploy to Sendai, the nearest large city to the epicentre, with the first consular team, on the Sunday. This was in part media-driven, but there was a practical need to establish a centre on the spot that could oversee consular search operations, evacuation if necessary, and media liaison. We drove up to the earthquake area on Sunday morning, arriving mid-afternoon, and I was based there for three days. In all, six teams deployed; we found about 170 people, and organised evacuations by coach as necessary to Tokyo.

One point which I worried about a lot at the time was the tone to strike with the media about probable British casualties. Such was the ferocity of the tsunami that I assumed there would be many foreigners killed in the disaster. I did not want to underplay this possibility and leave people in the UK thinking there was nothing to worry about, and then later have to acknowledge that we had been too complacent. But neither did I want to speculate on numbers. I thought it wiser to err on the side of being less rather than more reassuring. In the event, there were no British fatalities. But none of us knew that at the start of the crisis.

**API: What about the travel advice?**

This was the most difficult aspect of the crisis. It was additionally complicated by the nuclear disaster at Fukushima. We had to remember that 'travel advice' was essentially a public risk assessment; and the question of whether it was safe for British nationals to stay in or near what was seen to be harm's way was an issue of major political sensitivity.

Our advice evolved. Initially, it was simple – there was no question of anyone (other than emergency services) travelling to the affected region, and given shortages, power cuts etc, we advised against all non-essential travel to Tokyo. The Japanese Government imposed a 20km exclusion zone around Fukushima, extended later in the first week (under some pressure from the US, as the situation on the nuclear site worsened) to 80km.

The travel advice was informed by the scientific assessment made in the UK by the Scientific Advisory Group on Emergencies (SAGE), under the chairmanship of the Chief Scientific Adviser, Sir John Beddington. Sir John briefed members of the British community in Tokyo about risks from radiation, which SAGE considered, even in the ‘reasonable worst-case scenario’ and after the increased concern about the vulnerability of the spent fuel rods at Fukushima, to be manageable. His explanation of the scientific risks, which we publicised, did an enormous amount to calm nerves – Japanese as well as British.

However, as concerns about Fukushima grew, we nuanced our travel advice on the Thursday that it might be appropriate for British nationals in Tokyo to ‘consider leaving’, without actively recommending that they did so. We also issued emergency supplies of iodine to those who wanted the prophylactic, and laid on planes to evacuate people to Hong Kong, which were under-subscribed. Our aim was to adopt a position that was appropriately precautionary without panicking everyone into making it a self-fulfilling prophecy. It was the correct call, as the dangers of radiation in Tokyo, or indeed anywhere outside some parts of the exclusion zone, receded.

**API: What about the psychological impact on you and your staff?**

It is important to keep focused on this. Some of our Japanese staff had family and friends in the affected region, although this did not stop them reporting for duty immediately and working with great dedication throughout the crisis. The advice given to staff and families had to be consistent with that given to British nationals. We offered voluntary evacuation terms to some families who wished to leave. It may also be appropriate to give sick leave to individuals who for different reasons may find the pressure of working in a crisis of this kind, especially because of the perception of radiation danger, too much.

An Ambassador, or crisis leader, must guard against the feeling that he or she has to do everything, or the corresponding feelings of guilt and uncertainty at moments of inactivity. I had a superb team, led by my deputy head of mission, David Fitton, and we were rigorous and disciplined in ensuring that everyone got the sleep they needed to remain fresh and focused when difficult decisions had to be taken and explained to the media. Effective trauma risk assessment will also be valuable in ensuring that people are alert to the dangers of post-traumatic stress disorder, and that these are properly addressed if they occur.

But I always remembered that however stressful these weeks were for me, they were nothing compared with the suffering of the individuals and families directly caught up in this terrible disaster. Keeping the human element in one’s mind is important as one tries to cope with one’s professional responsibilities.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Access. Engagement. Resolution.**

The Ambassador Partnership LLP is a **unique specialist** partnership of former Ambassadors with unrivalled networks of influence in almost 100 countries. We provide discreet services to resolve your international problems and to improve your capacity to operate effectively wherever you need to.

We are **dispute resolution** specialists and **political risk** experts.

To discuss how we can help you to manage your political risk please call:

**Tracey Stewart**

Partnership Secretary

+44 (0) 7950 944 010

[tracey.stewart@ambassadorllp.com](mailto:tracey.stewart@ambassadorllp.com)

[www.ambassadorllp.com](http://www.ambassadorllp.com)