

**Summary Report of  
Soka Gakkai's Relief Activities  
following the March 11, 2011,  
Great East Japan Earthquake**

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## **1. BACKGROUND**

The Soka Gakkai carried out relief activities primarily focusing on the three most severely damaged prefectures of Miyagi, Iwate and Fukushima.

Throughout, measures taken by the Soka Gakkai as an organization were complemented by voluntary action by individual members at the local level.

Nichiren Buddhism emphasizes belief in the great potential inherent in every person's life, and the importance of action to treasure each individual. Members' prayers for "the happiness of themselves and others" transform into a strong desire to contribute to their community and society. The philosophy of the Soka Gakkai also stresses staying strong in the face of difficulties.

### **Organizational Factors**

#### **Community-based Network**

The Soka Gakkai has developed its organizational network of members based on a key unit known as a "district," which consists of about 40 households living in the same neighborhood. These districts within the Soka Gakkai are deeply rooted in their respective communities. Because of this, Soka Gakkai members enjoy an extensive network in their community as well as having knowledge about the area, and this played a significant role in their response in the wake of the disaster.

#### **Respect for Youth Members**

In its regular activities, the Soka Gakkai aims to empower its local youth groups so many such groups and individual youth members took action at the grassroots.

## **2. SCOPE OF RELIEF AND RECOVERY ACTIVITIES**

The relief and recovery activities by the Soka Gakkai, including voluntary initiatives conducted by members, can be categorized into the following four areas:

### **(1) Rescue and Shelter of Quake Victims**

Two types of facilities served as hubs in the rescue and shelter of evacuees.

#### **Soka Gakkai Centers**

The Soka Gakkai has facilities or centers in various cities and towns to provide a venue for religious activities. In case of emergency, these centers are made available to the local community. Immediately after the quake and tsunami hit, 42 Soka Gakkai

centers located in the Tohoku region as well as in Ibaraki and Chiba Prefectures sheltered about 5,000 people.

Some centers have been officially designated by local governments as temporary shelters by prior agreement. All centers in the affected region served to:

- accommodate evacuees
- distribute relief goods to evacuees and, in some cases,
- conduct health consultations and make provisional diagnoses

### **Local Members' Homes**

Some Soka Gakkai members in each area offer their homes for local meetings on a regular basis. These members' homes were used:

- to accommodate local evacuees
- as relay points for distributing relief goods to victims whose homes were not completely destroyed

### **(2) Recovery Support for Affected Areas**

Taking advantage of the community-based network of the organization, the following activities were carried out:

- Relief goods were provided and distributed to evacuation shelters
- Cooperation with local government and the private sector was coordinated
- Donations were made by the Soka Gakkai headquarters to various municipalities
- Volunteer relief activities were undertaken by numerous individuals and groups of members at the local level

### **(3) Reconstruction of Local Communities**

Soka Gakkai members, and especially local leaders, in the affected areas were able to take full advantage of their strong relationships with their neighbors to promptly carry out relief activities, namely:

- confirming the safety of local members and residents
- providing encouragement and emotional support to local members and residents
- extending support to resident foreigners
- communicating information on items in short supply (to local governments and Soka Gakkai centers)

### **(4) Memorial Services for Victims and Prayers for Recovery**

The Soka Gakkai conducted memorial services to pray for victims of the calamity, to

offer prayers for the peace and security of those affected and for the swift recovery of devastated areas. Memorial services to pray for the victims 49 days after the disaster in accordance with Buddhist tradition were held in cities in the three most severely affected prefectures of Miyagi, Iwate and Fukushima at 50 venues, attended by around 9,000 people.

### **3. SUBSTANCE OF ACTIVITIES**

#### **Volunteer Relief Activities**

- Local Soka Gakkai members, despite themselves suffering the effects of the disaster, took the initiative to rescue others who were likewise suffering, and participated in various disaster response activities. These members helped deliver and distribute relief goods at public emergency shelters as well as Soka Gakkai centers.
- In Soka Gakkai centers where people sought refuge, individual local Soka Gakkai leaders who were responsible for the management of the centers took the initiative to secure food and water, ensure sleeping space for everyone, address hygiene and security issues, etc., and allotted roles to the volunteers so the centers could function properly as evacuation shelters.
- Soka Gakkai leaders also engaged in psychological support and care, listening to the concerns of disaster survivors who were sheltered at Soka Gakkai centers.
- Leaders of the organization addressed the needs of those who were affected by the disaster and sheltered in centers, and if necessary referred them to relevant experts, e.g. local government or assembly members or lawyers for information on relief and recovery schemes.
- Many volunteer task forces were spontaneously formed in the affected area by local Soka Gakkai members primarily led by Youth Division members. The task forces included, for example, the “I Want You to Win Team” in Ishinomaki City, Miyagi Prefecture, and “The Team of Young Lions” in Miyako City, Iwate Prefecture. Members have been engaged in cleaning up ravaged areas and helping to clean homes of debris and so forth. Another task force named “The Bicycle Rescue Team” was created in areas of Sendai where there are many elderly citizens. Team members have been actively assisting the elderly who live alone and are suffering from the effects of the disaster, buying food and other essentials for them as well as helping to clean up. Every Sunday, 100 local youth members

travel from Sendai to help clean-up activities in Ishinomaki and other affected cities.

### **Encouragement and Psychological Care for Members**

- Typical Soka Gakkai discussion meetings were held as part of the religious activities at members' houses in less-affected locations as well as at emergency shelters throughout the devastated areas. In these "Kibo (Hope) discussion meetings," members studied Nichiren's teachings and read words of encouragement by SGI President Daisaku Ikeda.
- Local Soka Gakkai leaders in the affected area and Soka Gakkai staff dispatched there aimed to visit, meet face to face with and listen to each local member affected by the disaster.
- A prayer room or area was set up in each Soka Gakkai center where evacuees were accommodated, and memorial services were led by regional leaders together with affected members.

### **Soka Gakkai Groups Outside the Disaster Zone**

#### **Volunteer Relief Activities**

- During the initial stage immediately after the earthquake, starting on the afternoon of the quake itself, Soka Gakkai members in Niigata who had experienced a major earthquake themselves—the Great Chuetsu Earthquake—prepared rice balls (up to 20,000 daily) and delivered them by truck with other supplies via Yamagata Prefecture, the only negotiable route at the time, to the Soka Gakkai Tohoku Culture Center in Sendai where the organization's Tohoku regional emergency coordination center had been set up.
- Similarly, the Soka Gakkai in Hokkaido, quickly judging what would be needed based on their past experiences of two major natural disasters, dispatched relief supplies including rice, instant noodles and water by ferry to Iwate Prefecture.
- On the day the earthquake hit, Kansai Soka Gakkai, home to Hyogo, the epicenter of the Great Hanshin Earthquake of 1995, arranged to have relief goods sent to Miyagi Prefecture and other destinations in the affected areas.

### **Emergency Coordination Centers**

#### **Background**

The Soka Gakkai has accumulated experience of humanitarian relief activities

in response to natural disasters in Japan especially over the past 15 years, namely the Great Hanshin Earthquake and the Niigata Chuetsu Earthquake. Based on the lessons learned, a standing Risk Management Committee was formed in 2009 at the headquarters and within main Soka Gakkai centers in each region and prefecture. These committees aim to take measures in response to natural disasters for the purpose of not only protecting members' lives but also contributing to society in response.

### **Central Emergency Coordination Center**

- Immediately after the earthquake hit, a Central Emergency Coordination Center was organized at the Soka Gakkai headquarters. It communicated with the Soka Gakkai's Tohoku Culture Center, the main center in the affected area, via a telecommunications system to grasp the situation and discuss measures to be taken. This communication was made possible thanks to a standby generator.
- Close communication continued every day between the central and regional emergency centers via satellite telephone and priority disaster telephone lines to collect and assess information.

Based on the information collected, the following measures were taken:

- Relief supplies at the initial post-disaster phase were promptly procured, mainly from two warehouses located in Tokyo and Osaka which have been maintained since the Great Hanshin Earthquake based on lessons learned from it.
- Relief supplies were arranged and delivered to most effectively meet the needs of the affected areas.
- In order to transport relief goods efficiently, the best possible transportation routes were examined and established in cooperation with the local Soka Gakkai organization in the affected areas and transport services under contract to the Soka Gakkai headquarters.
- Soka Gakkai dispatched to the affected areas its executive leaders, Youth Division staff from throughout Japan, and a medical team of doctors and nurses who are members.
- Reconferral of damaged or lost Gohonzon (the object of devotion), and provision of butsudans in which to enshrine them was arranged.
- A communication network—"The Hope System"—was put in place for staying in contact with Soka Gakkai members who moved away from affected areas to other parts of the country in order to continue providing support and encouragement to each individual.

## **4. DATA ON MAIN RELIEF ACTIVITIES**

### **(1) Human Resources**

#### **i. Youth Division Staff**

A total of 300 Youth Division staff of the Soka Gakkai from around the country had been dispatched in teams to the affected area (as of June 20). From late May, about 50 Youth Division staff were sent to recovery support centers in the affected area every week from all over Japan, so that approximately 100 Youth Division staff could be constantly stationed there. Each time they stay there for two weeks. Their tasks include clean-up of residences and other buildings in the affected areas and support in delivering relief items.

#### **ii. Medical Staff**

- A medical team was dispatched by the Soka Gakkai's Central Emergency Coordination Center from March 13 to 20. Including volunteer doctors and nurses within the affected area, a medical team was stationed in the Soka Gakkai's Tohoku Culture Center in Sendai, accommodating the greatest number of evacuees, to provide medical care and consultation services.
- Doctors and nurses from the affected area also conducted health consultation sessions at the Ishinomaki Peace Center, Miyagi Prefecture and in Iwate and Fukushima Prefectures.

#### **iii. Transportation Staff**

Drivers and transportation vehicles were hired from the Soka Gakkai headquarters' contract transportation company to set up a system of trucks and drivers to transport relief goods from around the country.

### **(2) Relief Supplies**

#### **Number of Relief Items Supplied**

The total number of items provided was approximately 642,000 as of May 30. Details are as follows:

- Portable toilets (Approx. 60,000 units)
- Clothing (Approx. 24,000 items): Winter clothes, shirts, trousers, underwear, etc.
- Bedding (Approx. 4,700 items): Blankets, futon mattresses, etc.
- Daily necessities (Approx. 183,000 items): Elderly care products (adult size diapers etc.)

- Food and drink (Approx. 296,000 items): Riceballs, fruit, preserved foods, beverages, sweets, seasonings, etc.
- Medical supplies (Approx. 40,600 items): Cold medicine, digestive medicine, mouthwash, bandages, etc.
- Other emergency supplies (Approx. 33,400 items): Fuel (heavy oil, light oil, gasoline – approx. 8,320 liters), generators, etc., commodities (blood pressure gauges, bicycles, whiteboards, washing machines, dryers, kettles, portable cooking stoves, gas cartridges, etc.)

### **(3) Accommodation of Evacuees**

Forty-two Soka Gakkai centers located in the Tohoku region as well as in Ibaraki and Chiba Prefectures sheltered about 5,000 people, mainly those who lived nearby. Examples of the maximum number of evacuees sheltered by the centers which served as emergency shelter are as follows:

#### **Miyagi Pref. (14 culture centers)**

- Tohoku Culture Center: Approx. 1,000 people
- Furukawa Culture Center: Approx. 800
- Wakabayashi Peace Center: Approx. 600

#### **Iwate Pref. (6 centers)**

- Iwate Culture Center: Approx. 40
- Kamaishi Culture Center: Approx. 40
- Ichinoseki Culture Center: Approx. 20

#### **Fukushima Pref. (9 centers)**

- Fukushima Culture Center: Approx. 150
- Fukushima Peace Center: Approx. 150
- Soma Center: Approx. 120
- Iwaki Peace Center: Approx. 100

#### **Ibaragi Pref. (3 centers)**

- Katsuta Culture Center: Approx. 20

#### **Chiba Pref. (10 centers)**

- Funabashi Ikeda Auditorium: Approx. 230
- Asahi Culture Center: Approx. 35

### **(4) Donations**

On March 31, the Soka Gakkai headquarters made donations to the following local governments in support of relief efforts.

Chiba Prefecture	¥10 million
Fukushima Prefecture	¥150 million
Ibaragi Prefecture	¥30 million
Iwate Prefecture	¥150 million
Miyagi Prefecture	¥100 million
Sendai City	¥100 million
<b>Total amount</b>	<b>¥540 million</b>

(Total US\$6.7 million per exchange rate as of May 30)

With respect to donations and relief goods by individual members, the Soka Gakkai as an organization did not organize such collections. For the purpose of more effective support, it was suggested that those who wished to offer donations or aid supplies contact official institutions equipped and authorized to accept such donations.

In addition to the Soka Gakkai in Japan, the following SGI organizations around the world have given donations to various organizations such as Red Cross in support of relief activities in the affected areas.

Brazil	US\$61,690
Canada	US\$10,383
Hong Kong	US\$266,528
India	US\$478,808
Indonesia	US\$20,475
Macao	US\$12,491
Malaysia	US\$348,374
Paraguay	US\$7,843
Peru	US\$8,000
Philippines	US\$60,797
Singapore	US\$573,669
South Korea	US\$153,621
Switzerland	US\$10,000
Taiwan	US\$126,400
Thailand	US\$49,538
U.S.A.	US\$50,000
<b>Total amount</b>	<b>US\$2,238,617</b>

(approx. ¥180 million per exchange rate as of May 30)

## **5. VOICES OF SOKA GAKKAI LEADERS INVOLVED IN RELIEF ACTIVITIES**

### ***Mr. Akihiko Morishima—Leader of Soka Gakkai in Miyagi Prefecture***

I urged that a regional emergency coordination center be set up within the office of the Tohoku Culture Center when we experienced the massive earthquake that lasted for six minutes. Immediately thereafter, I decided to prioritize confirming people's safety as a first step. After confirming the safety of members and staff within the center, I utilized the direct phone line set up for such emergencies at all culture centers within Miyagi Prefecture to coordinate our efforts.

Later, I contacted the Soka Gakkai headquarters through the teleconferencing system, while residents of the community and local members were pouring in to seek refuge. We accepted all 500 evacuees, resolved to house any and everyone who was in need of immediate aid. In the end, we accepted 1,000 people in total.

We placed an emergency order for bedding for all evacuees with a company we already had a close connection with. Staff and volunteers from among the evacuees stayed up all night cooking rice that we had in storage to make and distribute 1,000 rice balls to everyone at the center.

As there was no running water for the lavatory facilities, we had to use portable toilets instead. Because of the difficulty of use, women staff were on duty 24 hours, taking turns to explain how they functioned.

All those who had been sheltered at the culture center expressed their gratitude upon leaving. I met some who said things like: "I've learned a great deal through my experience at this evacuation center. I'm determined to become a capable person to contribute to society."

Disaster victims are not weak. They are compelled to live each day under unspeakably harsh conditions, but they are actually very strong people. What is important is reaching out to them and empathizing with their situation. I feel the Buddhist philosophy of life that teaches that every person is endowed with the Buddha nature enables us to reach out and empathize with others. This is the very reason why we, who are disaster victims ourselves, can engage in relief activities.

I had doubts as to how to best accommodate and take care of evacuees amidst such

extreme conditions. It was President Ikeda's message, sent to us on March 16th quoting Takuboku Ishikawa's words, that truly supported me. Ishikawa was a poet who hailed from Tohoku who said, "Helping one person is a far greater achievement than becoming ruler of a country."

Thereafter, we conducted our relief activities focusing on the one person right in front of us and how best to help him/her. Grasping the needs of the people on the front lines led us to understand the larger picture of what was necessary in conducting relief activities. This may not have necessarily coincided with the approach taken by the local government. Nevertheless, this was our strength. I'm convinced we were able to deal with the situation speedily and sincerely, especially at such a critical moment, because we were well versed in President Ikeda's guidance and mottoes such as, "Take action for that one person right in front of you" and "For the sake of society," and could immediately put them into action.

I have been afraid to look back on these past three months. However, in the next three months, a time will come when it will be painful to live life looking at what looms ahead. Now the recovery phase is beginning and questions will arise, such as what to do and where to begin.

***Mr. Shin'ichi Tanno—Leader in Ishinomaki City, Miyagi Prefecture***

Immediately after the earthquake struck, I thought, "I have to protect the members somehow," and headed for Ishinomaki Culture Center. When I arrived, 60 people including members and residents of the local community had already taken refuge there. A warning had been announced of the impending onset of a 6-meter-high tsunami, so I decided the evacuees had to be led to higher ground, to the second floor of the center, because I judged it wasn't possible to leave the culture center and flee to the hills behind. Thereafter, I made arrangements to climb up to the roof, prepared for any situation should the tsunami follow us higher. Fortunately, the tsunami stopped in front of the entrance to the parking area.

Nevertheless, I had to continue to be in charge of the evacuation center and protect its inhabitants to my utmost for the next few days during which communications remained cut off and the infrastructure was totally destroyed. There was no running water for more than a month and no electricity for three weeks. To run the culture center as an evacuation center free of accidents, I assigned specific roles to each one of the evacuees. For example, it would be the role of the women's division to cook

using whatever was already in storage and relief supplies that arrived via the Soka Gakkai. The local leaders would also listen to each person who was feeling stressed or anxious. These leaders, accustomed to listening to members' problems through visiting them at home and honing their skills of communication through effective dialogue on a daily basis, have taken the initiative to encourage an atmosphere of dialogue among evacuees to cooperate, not only at Soka Gakkai culture centers, but at other evacuation centers as well.

In retrospect, I feel that what I learned through engaging in Gakkai activities was fully put to use at such a time of emergency.

***Mr. Masami Ando and Ms. Hideko Sasaki—Men's and Women's Leaders, Kamaishi City, Iwate Prefecture***

Our relief activities began with confirming the safety of the residents. We made our rounds visiting each and every member and friends in our community while listing up the relief items each individual needed, literally "cherishing each and every person."

We used a member's home in Tono City adjacent to the devastated Kamaishi City as our center for accumulation of relief goods in order to deliver them to the coastline areas. Not only did we transport goods to affected areas, but to unaffected areas as well. This was because the infrastructure of the whole area was completely destroyed by the earthquake which also hindered the procurement of goods. We conducted our relief activities wholeheartedly, bearing this in mind.

I'm sure many people will eventually be moving into temporary housing and I personally feel it is of utmost importance that such residents not remain isolated. It will be necessary to call on, protect and be in touch with them constantly. I feel that is the best way to take care of their psychological and emotional needs.

Central to the role of religion, I'm convinced, is the importance of prayer. I made a conscious effort to attend funerals regardless of the distance. My reason for doing that was to show support to each bereaved person and try to help them to begin to come to terms with their loss. Following a memorial service organized by the Soka Gakkai for all the victims of the disaster, one gentleman cried unreservedly and shared, "I lost my whole family and thought I had lost all emotions as well. However, today as I prayed together with all of you, I couldn't control my tears. I feel I've regained my humanity." Prayer exists neither to seek comfort nor escape into oneself. I realized it

exists for the sake of challenging reality.

***Comment by a member of the Soka Gakkai Youth Division, Natori City, Miyagi Prefecture***

I helped to manage and coordinate the local evacuation shelter I myself had been evacuated to. On the day the earthquake struck, more than 90 people came to the designated community shelter. There was no running water or electricity. I worked together with the people of our community to draw water from storage tanks, prepare a generator for electricity and so on to solve problems concerning such lifelines. Due to such concerted efforts, the local residents' community center was officially designated as an evacuation shelter, which made it possible for us to receive three meals per day. The training I had undergone in the organization turned out to be extremely useful during such an emergency.

***Comment by a member of the Soka Gakkai Youth Division, Taihaku Ward, Sendai, Miyagi Prefecture***

I was in my apartment where I lived alone when the earthquake hit. As a new member who just joined Soka Gakkai last November (2010), I was convinced that we shared a strong bond every time the members encouraged me at discussion meetings and youth meetings. I would recall the other members' faces whenever I felt anxious or lonely after the earthquake. At the Soka Gakkai Taihaku Culture Center where I found shelter, the men's, women's and youth division members all encouraged and supported each other. Although they were all affected by the disaster themselves, their dedicated efforts for the person right in front of them inspired me with courage. I volunteered to do my part to contribute to the management of the shelter, acting as receptionist and security guard as well as distributing relief goods.

## **6. FUTURE ISSUES**

### **Long-term Support System**

Soka Gakkai will seriously consider the range of possible contributions it can offer as an organization on an ongoing basis. For instance, the following points will be considered:

- Conducting *gongyo* memorial services \*
- Establishment of ways to attend to the ongoing psychological and emotional health of disaster victims
- Promotion of health consultations by medical teams
- Dispatching of musical and other performing groups to affected areas

- Providing educational support to disaster affected schoolchildren
- Providing legal advice consultations

## **7. PRESENTATION AT UNHCR'S ANNUAL CONSULTATIONS WITH NGOS**

On June 28, 2011, a Soka Gakkai representative on behalf of Buddhist organizations gave a presentation, "Soka Gakkai's Relief and Post-Disaster Recovery Support Activities following the Great East Japan Earthquake on March 11, 2011," at a thematic session titled "Strengthening protection: The role of faith-based organizations (FBO)" at UNHCR's Annual Consultations with NGOs held in Geneva, Switzerland. Under the subject of FBOs' contributions on the site of humanitarian assistance, the Soka Gakkai representative gave a presentation introducing examples of Soka Gakkai's endeavors.

### **(1) Background about the Thematic Session Focused on FBOs at the UNHCR Conference**

Many faith-based organizations (FBOs) have been at the forefront of humanitarian relief activities at sites of conflict and disaster around the world. However, the purpose, method and scale of their relief activities have not necessarily been well understood.

Behind this might be a tendency to overlook or downplay the influence of faith or to treat faith with skepticism and caution. However, faith plays an indispensable role in people's lives enabling them to cope with trauma, validates their humanity, informs their decisions and offers guidance, compassion, consolation and hope in difficult situations. FBOs can use their faith to give psychological support in addition to physical support.

Moreover, since FBOs have activities deeply rooted in the respective communities, they can gain access to actual sites even under more complex and unstable situations in providing humanitarian assistance. Furthermore, their knowledge about the respective areas and links to their communities become a strength enabling them to conduct more appropriate and detailed activities.

### **(2) Overview of the presentation**

The presentation focused on the following five major points:

- i. Complex and insecure environment caused by the March 11 disaster**  
Details of the “complex and insecure environment” caused by the massive earthquake, tsunami, meltdown and other problems of the nuclear power plant in Fukushima were explained.
- ii. Emergency response by citizens groups in Japan: the example of Soka Gakkai**  
As one of the civil organizations engaged in emergency humanitarian support activities, it was explained that the Soka Gakkai was engaged in relief and recovery activities from the viewpoint of both material and psychological support.
- iii. Strengths and opportunities**  
Roles FBOs can play were discussed through the example of the Soka Gakkai. It was pointed out that the victims themselves became involved in relief activities spontaneously and willingly because they had been empowered. It was explained that faith serves as an important source of empowerment in the case of the Soka Gakkai.
- iv. Challenges**  
Three challenges that need to be addressed were discussed: identifying effective and appropriate methods in providing psychological support; coordination with public-sector bodies; and the need for FBOs to work in solidarity beyond differences.
- v. The lesson learned**  
Quoting one of the victims who said, “Disaster victims are not weak people,” it was pointed out that it is empowerment of the surviving victims that makes humanitarian relief effective and sustainable.

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