

Japan: health after the earthquake



The magnitude 9.0 earthquake that hit the northeast coast of Honshu at 2.46 pm on March 11 has shocked TV viewers worldwide. The unstoppable force of the tsunami that followed was a hitherto rarely seen spectacle—and tragedy. Estimates suggest that as many as 10 000 people may have died. Half a million people have been made homeless and the country has been plunged into a state of emergency. The Japanese Government has responded calmly and carefully to the catastrophe. But the very real danger of radiation exposure now represents a sinister further complication facing Japan's political leaders.

Although the earthquake caused huge structural damage, fires now seem largely under control and most hospitals are fully operational. Over 1 million households are still without electricity or running water, but those numbers are falling fast. The government acted quickly by establishing an emergency management committee, led by the Prime Minister. A disaster medical assistance team activated 120 field units, with a further 119 on standby. Food, water, blankets, and portable latrines have been widely distributed to those affected. The international response has also been impressive, with at least ten

countries sending additional rescue teams.

The disaster is bad enough. But the multiple explosions at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station have caused temporary increases in radiation outside the affected reactor units. WHO immediately sought help from its Radiation Emergency Medical Preparedness and Assistance Network—40 specialist institutions expert in radiation emergency medicine. WHO's task in this situation is to assess the public health risk and provide technical guidance and assistance. It has done so, reporting that although the public health risk is small, conditions could change. What happens over the next few days depends on whether further radiation is released, as well as the weather.

In the coming weeks, Japan will inevitably enter a period of profound mourning and reflection. WHO might consider convening experts to review the consequences for human safety of nuclear energy, and the wider lessons to be learned from recent earthquakes. The mounting anxiety about events in Japan demands a calm but considered international, as well as national, response.

■ *The Lancet*

The end of the one-child policy in China?



China's one-child policy, introduced in 1979, was a controversial social decision not only for the country, but also for the rest of the world. The policy was launched at the beginning of China's economic reforms, when the country was home to a quarter of the world's population. The Chinese Government at that time saw population containment as an essential component to alleviate its social, economic, and environmental predicaments. In 2007, Chinese authorities claimed the policy had helped prevent 400 million births. They also justified their coercive social experiment by arguing that it had contributed greatly to economic growth. In a survey undertaken in 2008, 76% of the Chinese population apparently supported the policy.

However, the one-child policy has been criticised within and outside the country as a serious violation of the right to reproductive freedom. It has led to forced abortions and sterilisations, maternal deaths among women with pregnancies outside of family planning, female infanticide, and child abandonment.

Last week, in the plenary sessions of the annual

Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and the National People's Congress, a two-child policy was proposed, to start in 2015. Experts have suggested that the one-child policy has resulted in an increase in older people and a decrease in younger workers, as well as a sex-ratio imbalance, which might threaten China's economic growth.

The debate around China's policy on the number of children allowed by a family deserves greater global scrutiny. The issue should not be one of economics. Instead, it should be about fully realising the right of each woman to determine her own reproductive health and exercise her own choices over the number of children she and her family have. China's economic success has delivered huge benefits to her people. But one benefit yet to be achieved, essential to China's sustainable future, is the expansion of freedoms to enable each individual's life path to be pursued without state coercion. Reproductive health is a vital, and neglected, dimension of those freedoms. ■ *The Lancet*

For the two-child policy discussion in the annual plenary sessions of Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and the National People's Congress see <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90776/90882/7310975.html>

For the 2008 survey see <http://pewglobal.org/2008/07/22/the-chinese-celebrate-their-roaring-economy-as-they-struggle-with-its-costs/>