

Tokyo Remains Stoic Amid Japan-Is-Doomed Reports

By William Pesek

Of all the things I expected to experience in Tokyo, hugging three Japanese female strangers in their 70s was never part of the plan.

This city is no-public-display-of-affection central. The anti-Paris when it comes to spontaneous gestures of intimacy. When the ground begins to shake, protocol is the first casualty. So, when a big aftershock hit Shinjuku train station, we four panicked strangers joined arms and squeezed for dear life.

We quickly came to our senses when the shaking stopped, giggled nervously and parted ways. The point is that Tokyoites are out and about. We are all living our lives as best we can, notwithstanding the hyperbolic international

news coverage of Japan's plight. Frankly, when I watch CNN I feel like I should buy guns, flee to a cabin in the wilderness and find God.

Then I step outside my place in Tokyo and see that school kids are still off to class, my local coffee shop is open, the neighborhood ramen shops are abuzz with noodle-slurping patrons and taxis are picking up fares. Joggers and cyclists still zoom by, the hair salon on the corner is doing brisk business and the trains are running on time.

The newspaper still comes. The mail, too. The sweet-potato guy still drives by every hour. Touts still pass out fliers for this eatery or that pachinko parlor. The young Chinese massage ladies still try to coax me into some dodgy spa. Nigerian men still angle to drag me into girlie bars.

"Beautiful honeys! Special earthquake price!" they proclaim.

Young hipsters in Shibuya are as jaunty as ever, no doubt mulling an earthquake-chic look. Police in low-crime Japan look as bored as ever.

Look, we're dealing here. We are worried, of course, and taking precautions. Flashlights, candles, bottled water, canned food, blankets, radios, change for pay telephones, you name it. Not everyone is scurrying to the airport or jostling for a bullet-train to safety. We aren't being complacent; we know full well that dangerous radiation leaks threaten us. Really, we do. We choose to stay and do our best.

So please, no more alarmist e-mails suggesting we are going to die -- that Chernobyl 2.0 is afoot. It's amazing to me how everyone is suddenly a nuclear expert. Do this, eat that, rub this on your skin, read this report, run for the hills, are you bonkers? We appreciate the concern. We genuinely

do. But when I turn on international TV channels and scan my e-mails, I suddenly feel like I need a drink or a hug or something.

Japan's 126 million residents could be excused for wondering if we've been cast in some bad end-of-the world action flick. Yes, there was an almost biblical quality to the way the nation shook on March 11 and the waters did rise with supernatural speed to swallow entire towns. Trains were thrown into the air like something out of a Godzilla film, roads turned to jelly and nuclear power plants coughed out radiation.

At times, it feels like producer Jerry Bruckheimer might suddenly yell "cut!" as he finished up his latest apocalyptic box-office smash starring Nicolas Cage or Bruce Willis. Maybe John Cusack is in town filming "2012, the Sequel."

In the past week I've heard many comments and seen many sights one would never expect in wealthy, cosmopolitan Tokyo -- like long food lines.

"I've lived in this city all my life and I never thought I would be fighting for milk, bread and beer," said Toru Kabori, a 51-year-old accountant. "It's like some action movie -- where the world ends."

Then there's the surreal financial news. Take the yen's surge. Normally, I would revel in its gains to merrily plan an overseas holiday. The yen hitting a postwar high amid this level of uncertainty -- radiation, aftershocks, a coming recession -- is beyond absurd. It's another challenge for Japan's economy, not to mention the global one.

You know the interest-rate increase for which some Federal Reserve officials are itching? Well, you can forget that for a while. The same goes for the European Central Bank. You

know that Apple Inc. iPad 2 you had your eye on, the one that's already sold out? Good luck getting it now that Japan, where factories produce about one-fifth of semiconductors and 40 percent of electronic components, is offline for a while.

The losses will grow with each rolling power outage, each businessperson leaving and each over-the-top Japan-is-doomed TV report.

True, things are far from normal. Prosperous Japan isn't accustomed to humanitarian crises. It's a shock to see shantytowns popping up in the northeast -- hundreds of thousands huddled into overcrowded shelters without enough water, food, blankets, medical supplies and other essentials.

Yet the stoicism one sees in Tokyo, even as prospects for safety dwindle, is truly remarkable. It's not that we in Japan

don't get what's afoot. We're just doing our best during turbulent times that we hope will soon end.

Amid such uncertainty, one thing is clear: Rumors of Tokyo's death are wildly premature.