

Second Relief Fund Distribution in the Northeast of Japan

Written by Kay Tsao
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On July 15, volunteers from Tzu Chi headquarters in Taiwan and the Japan chapter departed from Tokyo again, for Rikuzentakata-shi, Kamai-shi, Yamada-cho and Otsuchi-cho.

I was assigned to the relief fund distribution in Otsuchi-cho. When our bus came close to our destination, we were left speechless by what we saw. Images of collapsed buildings, mangled cars, broken windows and fallen objects familiar from television news and magazine pictures suddenly became too realistic to bear. After hours and hours in the bus, we finally arrived at the Otsuchi-cho Elementary School, the location for the distribution of the relief funds. The school was seriously damaged by the tsunami and fire. We tried to be careful when cleaning and setting up the distribution area, to avoid objects falling from above.

On July 16, the distribution officially began. When we arrived at the elementary school, the residents were already waiting for us by the entrance in an orderly line. When we greeted them with good morning, they responded politely; their eyes were filled with anxiety and maybe a slight doubt. What is Tzu Chi? Why are these people here to distribute relief funds to us? As they looked at us, they seemed to ask these questions silently.

To receive the funds, the residents had to present a form detailing their household, with a list of the head and the members. The number of people in a household determined the amount to be distributed, as follows:

1 person—30,000 yen
2~3 persons—50,000 yen
4 persons and above—70,000 yen



It was when I started to confirm and approve each of the residents who stepped forward that I truly and deeply realized how profoundly the families of Otsuchi-cho have been destroyed and forever changed by the disaster. There were mothers with children who came in the place of a lost father and elderly people who came alone in place of a lost husband or wife. One grandmother even presented forms for two households, one for her husband and the other for her son. They were applying for their loved ones who had lost their lives during the catastrophe. Imagine how hurtful it was to apply and receive the funds, which might remind them again of the horrifying nightmare on March 11.

However, when the Tzu Chi volunteers presented the relief fund to the residents with a bow of consolation and gratitude, tears fell from their eyes. Some even bowed and said "thank you" several times to each of the Tzu Chi volunteers. From their facial expression, it seemed that the residents came into the school with anxiety and worries but left with joy and gratitude. When

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receiving the fund with a deep bow, some residents told us: "Thank you so much for giving me the courage to go on..."

From July 15 to July 18, the Tzu Chi volunteers distributed relief funds to a total of 6,480 families -- 3,481 in Otsuchi-cho, 2,519 in Yamada-cho, 325 in Kamai-shi and 155 in Rikuzentakata-shi.

When leaving the elementary school, we discovered fresh flowers placed on a statue in front of the entrance. People said that a student from this elementary school was washed away by the tsunami and the water carried her body to the statue of her own school. The girl's family bring flowers every day to pray for her to rest in peace.

We walked carefully and gently on the rubble in front of the Otsuchi Elementary School, trying to avoid more damage to the earth. After the earthquake and tsunami, the natural landscape of the Northeast is as beautiful and peaceful as ever -- but the lives of the people can never be the same.