UNDP welcomes Japan's role in spreading disaster prevention

Michiharu Mekata SPECIAL TO THE JAPAN TIMES

At the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), I visited Japan earlier this month as part of a delegation holding various strategic dialogues with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). The Japan Times took the opportunity to interview me and hear about our relationship with Japan. Below are excerpts of our interview:

**What were your feelings toward Japan when you heard about the earthquake and tsunami that hit the country on March 11?**

My first reaction was one of deep compassion, sorrow, and sympathy for the Japanese people. There were so many who lost their families and friends. Despite these difficult times, Japan showed its solidarity and commitment to contribute to the international community.

**Both the United Nations and UNDP have a deep sense of gratitude toward Japan and its people's willingness to help others. How do you think the relationship is important?**

I think the relationship is vital for Japan's recovery and the well-being of the international community. It's important to continue working together to address various disaster risks.

**Do you think the events of March 11 have presented some meaningful learning experiences for the international arena?**

Yes, Japan represents the image of a country that's stood strong in times of crisis. We know that it's invested in disaster preparedness, probably more so than any other country in the world. This is also true of 20,000 lives lost or still missing in a vast number. But if it had not made such investments, the death toll would have been astronomical.

Speaking of man-made crisis, the nuclear accident at the Fukushima power plant has been an element, along with the earthquake and tsunami. Doesn't that present a distinctive learning opportunity for mankind?

Yes, it is for the nuclear community. We must seriously look at the locations of the nuclear power plants and so on. In order to take a constructive move forward, we must plan for scenarios that have so far been totally unimaginable, but unexpected.

**There is an immense opportunity, especially for the developing countries as well as the developed nations that are planning to build or have already built their own nuclear plants.**

Indeed, there's an opportunity to learn from the experience of Japan, analyze the conditions carefully, and share the findings widely.

**In order to minimize the fear of the people about the situation, getting accurate, honest information out as quickly as possible becomes crucial.** Information sharing and communication becomes extremely important from the very beginning. Equally important is the monitoring and strengthening of the radiation levels on a daily basis, just as Japan is doing in its newspapers and on.

**In terms of food safety, steps that are taken to clean up the contaminated areas as well as the accumulation of knowledge on how to clean the sea and the land, should be shared and disseminated.**

UNDP, with the generous support of Japan through the Human Security Fund, has worked in the Chubu region doing a lot of knowledge-gathering and research in the past. We have been sharing that information with the Japanese government, the donor of our project. The U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon is also very interested in the nuclear issue of Fukushima and is bringing together a group of experts, such as the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) and the WHO (World Health Organization), on a bilateral basis.

**As a development agency, UNDP hopes that the lessons learned are shared as much as possible and as quickly as possible with developing countries.** Every creative mind should be put together and out-of-the-box thinking should be promoted.