

The Great Tōhoku-Earthquake (大東北地震)

Personal record 11th - 31st March 2011

From March 11th to March 31st 2011 the usual updates to existing articles and new articles on “normal” Japanese living, culture and sights on this website were suspended. The blog of events stated below, as I witness them here in Tōkyō, could be found instead – they were, however, not representative for the situation in the areas of real catastrophe.

I have discontinued to blog of events today, not because the crisis can already be regarded as “settled” (quite to the contrary!), but because little “news” would be provided, if I kept on routinely reporting about my personal situation.

11.03.2011 (4.59 pm / 8.59 am CET)

Just a brief “all clear” to all those who might be interested:

Japan was hit by a rather strong earthquake around 2.46 pm – strong enough to even let the people of Tokyo who are rather used to earthquakes escape from their homes and offices. Even two hours after the main earthquake the earth’s attacks haven’t stopped. However, apart from nerves on the edge and some broken china, everything has been “survived” on my end.

The coastlines hit by a tsunami may feel a bit different about it.

12.03.2011 (10:50 pm / 2:50 pm CET)

The situation in Tokyo is normalizing slowly. However, the city (and other regions of the country in particular) are still victims to medium and strong earth quakes.

It seems that at least the core meltdown in one of the nuclear plants in Fukushima has – at least so far – not happened yet. They are still working on preventing at least this part of the catastrophe.

13.03.2011 (2:15 pm / 6:15 am CET)

There are still no definite news regarding the nuclear plants in Fukushima. According to official announcements a core meltdown has been prevented so far.

The number of earthquakes in the Tokyo area is getting less – nevertheless, we are on alert and keep our emergency bags handy.

13.03.2011 (9:10 pm / 2:10 pm CET)

From tomorrow it is most likely that electricity will be rationed. Hence we won’t be reachable from time to time. This is, however, a mere “inconvenience” for us which can be coped with easily.

15.03.2011 (9:00 am / 1:00 am CET)

Apart from a not too light earthquake in the morning hours, the night was quiet. We continue to keep track of things happening around us, but also try not to completely lose our inner peace.

14.03.2011 (11.30 pm / 3:30 pm CET)

There are still no definite news about the impact of the nuclear catastrophe in the Fukushima prefecture. We stay alert!

And apart from that we are trying to practice a little “normality”. In this conjunction it is

really breathtaking to witness the considerateness and friendliness the local people are capable of even in times of crisis. If we didn't know any better, we wouldn't even recognise that Tokyo is in a state of exception.

15.03.211 (2:00 pm / 6:00 am CET)

After further explosions in the nuclear plant in Fukushima people living in an area of 30 km around the plant (outside the 20-km-zone which has been evacuated) were asked to stay at home. There is still no danger for the city of Tokyo, 260 away from the disaster zone.

15.03.2011 (9:10 pm / 1:10 pm CET)

We have tried to practice a bit of "normality" again today and took care of our daily businesses.

Supply in the city is far from "normal" (bread and rice are hardly to be had), but by far not critical.

Illumination however has reached a "German" level – neon lights have largely been switched off and the shops have also reduced their lights by half. The essential energy saving is put into practice.

15.03.2011 (10.35 pm. / 2.35 pm CET)

The Kantō-area (Tokyo) was hit by a rather strong earthquake which, however, didn't harm us – apart from slightly elevated levels of fear.

16.03.2011 (10:00 am / 2:00 am CET)

After last night's shock we were at least able to spend an undisturbed night. Today's sunshine is in the sharpest contrast imaginable to the damaged estate of our nerves.

17.03.2011 (11.00 am / 3.00 am CET)

The night was quiet, the wind is blowing into the right direction to keep radiation's harm away from us and the sun is shining – unfortunately, one is not able to break out in joy over that.

16.03.2011 (11.55 pm / 2.55 pm CET)

Even though there were some nerve-wrecking earthquakes, we have tried to establish some "normality" again today. The electricity-cuts, the new "hobby" of the people of Tokyo to buy any bread they can get hold of (irrespective of the fact that the Japanese white bread doesn't provide any nutrition worth mentioning) and the streets which become empty already at the early evening, are kind of "spooky". Nevertheless, life in the city hasn't really become more difficult.

17.03.2011 (6.10 pm / 10.10 am CET)

The day was a rather quiet one.

The availability of food is still restricted (rice, bread and my dearly beloved natto beans are not to be had; bicycles also seem to be sold out). The supply of fresh fruits and vegetables, meat and fish, however, is stunning. Obviously at least some of the shoppers grab things without particular foresight.

18.03.2011 (10.45 am / 2.45 am CET)

There was an earthquake warning last night, however, the following earthquake near the Pacific coast near Tokyo was (by Japanese standards) rather unspectacular. The night was quiet though. Also a complete cut of electricity could be avoided. And, of course, we

are good citizens and try to save electricity whenever possible (first of all, we do without heating). Covered with warm plaids even 15 centigrade can be quite cosy and comfortable.

19.03.2011 (10:00 am / 2:00 am CET)

After a rather quiet day yesterday and a restful night, there were some light earthquakes in the early morning hours. Meanwhile even the World Health Organisation has “realised” that there is not immediate danger from radiation outside the evacuated areas. The WHO even didn’t see any reason why visitors should not come to Japan. That might be a blow to all those journalists who just can’t get enough of catastrophe and panic.

19.03.2011 (11:00 pm / 3:00 pm CET)

The fact that in the meantime more people are showing interest in my “Tokyo Sky Tree” (which as reached its final height at 634 meters)-article than the history of events surrounding the aftermath of last week’s earthquake, may be symptomatic.. As long as catastrophes are receipted as mere “entertainment”, it may not come as a surprise, that in the end no consequences are taken from them.

Meanwhile we are still trying to practice at least a little “normality” around here. For example, I was finally able to buy the first rice for a week. And even the fact that the complete platform of Sendagaya station was shaken by an earthquake when we were on our way into the city tonight, doesn’t seem to be of interest any more. And maybe rightfully so, as at least here in Tokyo it’s probably the best, not to lose calmness about accidents like that..

20.03.2011 (9:15 am / 1:15 am CET)

Also the last night was a quiet one..

The desperate actions undertaken to stabilise the situation as the nuclear plant in Fukushima show at least first results.

The US-government shows itself “not amused” over the fact that their “expert knowledge” has not been honoured by the Japanese administration as much as they expected. The USA claim the Japanese way of handling the catastrophe to be inadequate and that Japanese diplomats are not trustworthy.

Can the world become any “wronger”?

Isn’t it a comfort to know that everything the USA do is exemplary and that the US-American public is never told anything but the full truth...

20.03.2011 (9:45 pm / 1:45 pm CET)

The day was mostly quiet and only interrupted by rather mild earthquakes in Tokyo. The German Embassy has distributed information related to the taking of iodine pills and has – again – warned to take them prematurely (and thus impair their protective effect).

Our “Origin Bento” at the Meiji-Dōri, which maintains business even during this long weekend and bravely keeps up the supply of “transportable” meals has provided us with their rather affordable dishes for dinner.

21.03.2011 (10:10 am / 2:10 am CET)

We were blessed with another undisturbed night. As customary in Japan, today yesterday’s national holiday (Equinox) is being “repeated”, which may also lead to some relief for the strained electricity capacities.

Of course, nobody around here really feels like having long walks in “mother nature” right now. But today rain and unpleasant 10 centigrades make it rather fun to stay at home

(regardless, if one can spoil him-/herself with room-heating or not).

21.03.2011 (9:45 pm / 1:45 pm CET)

The situation at the nuclear plants remains highly explosive and unpredictable – and also our feeling of uncertainty remains straining. But there are also some glimpses of light at the end of the tunnel: After 10 days I was able to buy the first bread tonight. Also my favourite nattō-beans were sold again. Both are, of course, utterly unimportant – but after 10 days of uninterrupted tension even the tiniest things become essential.

22.03.2011 (11:15 am / 3:15 am CET)

Another night's sleep without interruption – body and mind are grateful for it. It's not yet clear whether my language school will resume lessons today.

22.03.2011 (3:30 pm / 7.30 am CET)

My language school has decided also to “practice normality” and has re-opened for the evening classes. Nevertheless, I wouldn't be surprised, if I was to only participant tonight.

22.03.2011 (10:00 pm / 2:00 pm CET)

The situation remains tense and confusing. However, tonight's Japanese lessons were – as always – a real blessing, as they provided an atmosphere that helped to forget the day's troubles for 90 minutes.

To see the city and the railway stations under energy-saving conditions is quite an experience, because the service provided is still well above German standards.

23.03.2011 (8:10 am / 0:10 am CET)

It was a good thing that I hadn't planned to get up late today: After 7.am I was virtually „shaken out of bed“ by three earthquakes in a row. The quakes weren't really dramatic here in Tōkyō, but nothing which would have supported a quiet sleep. Unfortunately, the epicentre was right in the area of catastrophe in the North of Japan. However, there was no considerable damage, according the reports broadcast seconds after the earthquake.

The people of „Wordpress“ (who are offering me the platform for this website) don't seem to need earthquakes or tsunami to fall „out of service“ – the server is located somewhere in the USA – this morning it was not possible to post anything to my site in a timely fashion.

23.03.2011 (9:00 pm / 1:00 pm CET)

After our “spring”-visit to the family grave in Hachiōji (in the very west of Tokyo, about half an hour via highway away from the centre parts of Tokyo) it gives me some consolation that I'm not young enough any more to participate in the hysteria associated with contaminated drinking water found in the north-eastern part of Tokyo.

Regardless of that, the earth hasn't quieted down just yet – nobody could blame us for not “moving” enough – getting used to earthquakes has never been forced on us like that before.

24.03.2011 (8:00 am / 0:00 am CET)

Why did I mock the fact that yesterday I was “shaken out of bed” after 7 am? The last night was over for the same reason at 5.44 am

But as tedious these earthquakes may be, they are rather negligible for one's mind, compared with the uncertainty deriving from the situation at the nuclear plants.

Still: We should be much more concerned with the ones in the actual zone of catastrophe.

24.03.2011 (11:15 pm / 3:15 pm CET)

I know, lots of you are expecting a word of relief. But there is no relief. The situation remains as strained as before, even though radiation levels have dropped in the Tokyo area. We may have reasons to rejoice later.

I have tried to calm myself down by some rather harsh letters to those in charge in Germany and with my Japanese lessons in the evening.

Our local Co-op also shows a different picture as to the availability of food: There was plenty of bread and rice available. On the other hand, the offer of soft drinks fell just a bit short.. Well, it didn't seem to be the right time to put on an ritual fast regarding to drinking habits.

25.03.2011 (10:25 am / 2:25 am CET)

We spoilt ourselves with the luxury of sleeping as long as we wanted (i.e. neither a clock nor an earthquake woke us up). MARVELLOUS!

The radioactive contamination of tap water has been reduced to "safe" levels during the last two days. In the meantime the German contamination by impertinent election campaign's brainwashing of people has reached an unbearable level. One wonders, which of the contaminations poses the higher risk to one's health. Radioactivity has a calculable half-life – political lies seem to linger on forever...

25.03.2011 (9:15 pm / 1:15 pm CET)

One could say: A quite day comes to an end. However, we are all waiting for more definite and hopeful news from the nuclear front. At least some of the most pressing matters have been dealt with. Nevertheless, troubles aren't over at all.

26.03.2011 (10:20 am / 2.20 am CET)

Another night without earthquakes (in Tokyo). But earthquakes have anyway become the less pressing problem for us. Yesterday I saw the first pictures from one of the man-made islands which had been built during the last decades in the Tokyo Bay. These islands have – as could be expected – suffered considerably from the earthquakes. The sandy foundation of these islands were shifted up to some meters. A man-hole shaft towering about two meters from a streets surface gave an impression of it.

26.03.2011 (11.45 pm / 3.45 pm CET)

The day was spent with the aim of bringing ourselves back to "normality". In the evening we discussed the present situation with Japanese and foreign friends and convinced ourselves that it was the right thing to do not to jump onto the panic-wagon others followed so carelessly. And we had a good time with good food and delicious German white wine from Rhineland-Palatinate.

And there were significantly more people on the road then about a week ago when we went back home (around 11 pm) – yet another sign for everybody's aim at getting back to some normality in life, in spite of the still unpredictable radiation situation.

The TV-programmes have stated campaigns to foster the nations feeling of "standing together" – which would appear to be strange somewhere else, but which seems to be a totally natural thing around here.

27.03.2011 (9.00 am / 2.00 am CET)

Another undisturbed night lies behind us – and a sunny day ahead of us. And even though the thread level hasn't changed at all, one feels compelled to spend a relaxed Sunday.

The daily study of domestic and international media in particular, however, rouses anger: As before the Japanese are presumptuously blamed for being unable to inform themselves correctly and for blindly following every announcement. At the same time the government's quest for the prevention of mass panic is called "concealment of the truth" – and then this "concealed truth" turns out to be nothing but guesswork. What is the purpose of that kind of journalism?

27.03.2011 (2.30 pm / 7.30 am CET)

Maybe this is not to most suitable topic for this page, but little harm can come from also showing that not the whole of Japan is an area of disaster and that Tokyo is not reduced to rubble. The attached pictures were taken today around noon at Tokyo's Shinjuku Gyoen: 110327 Shinjuku Gyoen

28.03.2011 (8.30 am / 1.30 am CET)

Dear bad mother earth made sure again that all those in Tokyo who would have overslept otherwise got their wake-up call at 7.24 am. this morning, when the northeast of the country was hit by an earthquake with a magnitude of 6.5. What lead to a tsunami-warning in the related areas, reached Tokyo as a very light earthquake only.

Mental and physical stress wearing out the people in the devastated areas and near the nuclear plants don't remain without effect: Even in a country like Japan that is based on a high level of intolerance when it comes to mistakes, mistakes do happen (as to be seen yesterday when there was a huge miscomputation of radioactivity close to the nuclear plant in Fukushima – strangely enough, this time it was the operating company, TEPCO, that exaggerated the figures).

28.03.2011 (9.30 pm / 2.30 pm CET)

There isn't much to be reported from our daily life that relates to the catastrophe in Northern Japan. It isn't really new or surprising that there is some shortage in goods in the supermarket at our evening-shopping-hour. And the fact that information coming from the nuclear plants in Fukushima remains manifold and inconclusive, is also not new. However, the continued guesswork in the German media and the obvious joy they take from reports of horror seem to haven't changed for the better either, even after the editor in chief of one of the big business magazines of the country (Germany) has publicly apologised for the irresponsible way of reporting by parts of his fellow journalists.

29.03.2011 (9.40 am / 2.40 am CET)

Isn't it an experience to see how the alarmist cheer, the appeasers keep on conciliating and how both are claiming the suzerainty of the written or spoken word, after TEPCO (the operator of the damaged nuclear plants in Fukushima) have – supposedly for the first time – taken into consideration that a partial core-meltdown may have happened? Both sides continue their error, they have been displaying from the very beginning of the nuclear catastrophe: What they claim to sell as "information" and "fact", is limited to an accumulation of "could be", "is possible" and "is assumed", while their "findings" aren't new for anybody. It's only the heads of politicians (not only in Japan and Europe) that have not recognised, let alone acknowledged that nuclear fission is no "controllable" way of power generation (which would be a prerequisite for according action).

29.03.2011 (10.40 pm / 3.40 pm CET)

There isn't much news to be added to my posting of this morning.

My Japanese lessons tonight were "enriched" by close relation to reality: There was a very

light earthquake which could be directly included in our exercises.

On TV we are still comforted by spots that aim at boosting morale and at reminding people of Japan's strength.

30.03.2011 (9.20 am / 2.20 am CET)

It is superfluous to complain about the nebulous kinds of reports one is getting related to the damaged nuclear plants – alarmists conceal positive news, appeasers conceal negative news.

It's kind of characteristic for the German press that it seems to have lost a great deal of interest in the people in the areas of catastrophe outside the zone plagued by radiation.

Tonight the wind is supposed to change again, bringing traces of radiation also to Tokyo. It's a good thing I went to the Shinjuku Gyoen already three days ago.

30.03.2011 (8.00 pm / 1.00 pm CET)

I have decided to discontinue the follow-up on the events of March 11th, 2011 tomorrow.

The restoration works in Tōhoku (東北 / とうほく) will take some more months - and the situation at the nuclear plants in Fukushima will remain uncertain, until - maybe in a couple of months - one could speak of a stabilisation. Nevertheless, this blog will remain part of "Ways to Japan", as the catastrophe (which is far from being overcome yet) will be part of Japan's contemporary history.

31.03.2011 (10.00 am / 2.00 am CET)

For the last time, I would like to add a sentence to this personal blog of events. My morning-review of the press shows again: There won't be any quick „solution“ to the problems that have developed at the nuclear plants in Fukushima. The operating company announced that presently they have no plan to re-activate the nuclear power plants in the future. If one reads the reports and sees the pictures of the crippled installation, one is compelled to ask oneself: were these people really so naive to even consider they could use them again in the future? Blood-curdling!

Also in the areas of devastation and emergency housing it will take months, if not years, to bring back normality into the people's lives.

Nevertheless, I do not share the opinion that Japan would not be able to cope with the situation.