

“Looking back on the Relief Activities at the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami Disaster”

Motoharu Kikuta

Administrator, Relief Team 6

(English Translation by Red Cross Nuclear Disaster Resource Center)

~~~ I still cannot forget that scene ~~~

Our team conducted relief activities at Azuma Gymnasium evacuation center, accepting 28 bedridden patients from the hospital located in the evacuation zone near the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. I never forget what I saw in the buses when they arrived. Unfortunately upon medical examination, three of them were confirmed dead. Four patients were transferred by ambulance to the Fukushima Red Cross Hospital.

After the nuclear power plant accident, no supports from other prefectures were available, but the help from the Kanagawa Red Cross DMAT encouraged us. They said that "This is definitely our obligation to help you even after the nuclear accident," and these words remain in my heart since then. I realized I should not forget my mission as a Japanese Red Cross staff in any circumstances.

I still cannot forget that scene.

I was dispatched for the relief activities at Azuma Park Gymnasium on March 16th, after the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant accident. The gymnasium was the largest evacuation center in the City of Fukushima with over 1,000 evacuees staying there. From the preliminary information about 30 relatively minor patients would be arriving by large buses and we were asked to give medical treatments mainly to them.

However according to the updated information we received at the evacuation center it was different. The fact was that the incoming patients were from the psychiatric hospital, located 3 Km away from Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant where the accident occurred. Most of them were dementia and bedridden patients, and some of them might be already dead. It was confirmed that the body contamination screenings were completed on them and they were all negative. Normally these kinds of patients should be directly sent to a hospital or an institution, and therefore, I had no idea why they were being sent to the evacuation center. But anyway we began setting up the first aid center including the mortuary.

The buses were unable to park in front of the gymnasium; therefore we had to transport the patients by shuttle vehicles for the distance of a few hundred meters. As I mentioned, “I still cannot forget that scene”. When I looked inside the bus; the bus was nearly full and some of the patients were lying down in the aisle. Their diapers seemed not to have been changed for two days, so the bus was filled with a bad odor. The elderly patients were wrapped in the blankets. Two days had now passed since the reactor No.3 of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant exploded on March 14th. Because no one from the psychiatric hospital accompanied the patients we were unable to know any of the patients’ conditions, and in many cases we could not even identify their names.

None of these patients were able to walk by themselves so we had to move them on stretchers from the bus to the shuttle vehicle. Snow started falling so it made the hard task even harder. We moved a total of 28 patients to the evacuation center one by one.

Unfortunately upon medical examination, three of them were confirmed dead.

We transferred four patients who needed further treatment such as gastro stoma to the Fukushima Red Cross Hospital by ambulance. It was past midnight when we finished our activities.

What encouraged us was that we were able to get help from the Kanagawa Red Cross DMAT. Despite the fact that it was after the nuclear accident and no support from other prefectures was available; including the patient transportation described above. They took over and simultaneously performed relief activities with us even though managing these kinds of patients at the evacuation center was assumed to be difficult. The administrator of the DMAT said to me that "This is definitely our obligation to help you even after the nuclear accident." Even today, these words remain in my heart.

These relief activities were really special especially under the aftermath of the nuclear power plant accident. However, I realize that I should not forget how important it is to be able to respond flexibly even under unforeseeable and difficult circumstances. I also should not forget my mission as a Japanese Red Cross staff in any circumstances.