

ユータルニ・リスト紙 嘉治大使インタビュー
(2021年1月24日付掲載紙面 仮英訳)

○見出し

Her Excellency Misako Kaji hosted us at her residence in Remete, recalled Fukushima and told about her experience of the devastating Zagreb earthquake.

Ambassador of the earthquake country “We Japanese in Zagreb also have a backpack ready”

○本文

Misako Kaji, the Japanese Ambassador to Croatia, greeted us sitting on the couch of the Japanese Embassy's residence in Remete, surrounded by the mascots of the Olympic Games and the Paralympics to be held in Japan this year. Apart from smiling eyes, her face was hidden by a black mask. Cheerful mascots of bright colors attracted attention at first, but right next to one of them was something else - a backpack with a white helmet and a small flashlight, a hint of a serious topic that will dominate our conversation: earthquakes.

Behind Kaji is more than 30 years of work in diplomacy. As a professional diplomat, her career took her to all parts of the world, including the United Nations in New York. It is in this organization that she sometimes collaborated, very well – she emphasizes, for example within the UN World Conference on Women or the Committee on Budget, with Croatian diplomats, but she never, she says with a laugh, even thought that one day she would become Japanese Ambassador to Croatia.

That is exactly what happened.

She arrived in Croatia a year and a half ago, in the end of May 2019. Her impression of our country at the time, she recalled, was completely different from the one she gained during her first, very short visit to Croatia, when she worked in Brussels.

"It was the end of May, a nice season, nice trees and nice historic buildings. It was really quiet, the atmosphere was nice and it was quite different from the impression I got when I was in Croatia, in Zagreb, for just one night during the war, during winter... The country has transformed, it has grown into a prosperous, peaceful, lively, kind state ", recounts Ambassador Kaji.

The first months of her term as ambassador - until February and the beginning of March last year were lively. There were speeches, receptions and events. On the occasion of the birthday of the Japanese emperor, Japanese masters prepared tuna, traditional kimonos were worn... She was very pleasantly surprised by how familiar people in Croatia are with various aspects of Japanese culture, and even with the statistics according to which Croatia is third country in the world, after Japan and the USA, by the share of haiku fans or authors in the total population.

But then, the earthquake happened. It was, as we will later experience on our own skin, only the first one in a row...

She tells us that during the first one which devastated the Croatian capital in March, she was here. During the second one which destroyed Petrinja and its surroundings, she was in Japan. And this first one too, she claims, was shocking.

"Remete is situated three kilometers from the epicenter so it was shaking quite severely," she recalls. The magnitude was not that big for Japan.

But in Croatia, the consequences were devastating. The damage in the city was great. Also, the residence itself and the embassy had cracks in the walls.

After that experience, she decided not to leave things to chance.

"When I arrived in Zagreb, I thought I did not need an emergency rucksack, which everyone has in Japan. But after the March earthquake, I realized we should have been better prepared and equipped," she says. She uses the rucksack for hiking, but now she has packed in it things that might be needed in case of a new tremor. She also put a small portable radio and a hand flashlight in it.

"I feel calmer when all this is packed. I don't have to run around and collect things, I feel more comfortable when I sleep" she explains, showing us an example of an evacuation backpack and everything that should be in it. And small things, she is pointing out holding handkerchiefs from backpacks, can make a difference. Or a small blanket for example, if you have to stay outside. It can keep you warm and prevent you from getting sick.

We dissect the contents of that "Japanese" evacuation backpack.

It contains a number of things that can potentially, in the worst case, save lives or make it much easier to cope in the event of a disaster. In addition to the already mentioned small

hand flashlight, blankets, handkerchiefs and helmets, the backpack contains: small towels, gloves and raincoats, hygiene supplies, some food (cans, snacks and chocolate), water, solar travel battery and charger, paper pad and a pen, first aid, plastic cutlery, disinfectant and face masks, and spare batteries. What's missing is underwear and clothes. Also, she adds, do not forget the car keys and some cash, and she adds a whole list of recommended things. It also includes candles and matches, a thermometer, personal documents...

"We can't reduce earthquakes, it's a natural disaster. But we can reduce the risk that comes with disaster, damage or suffering," the ambassador explains, adding that people are now learning to live with earthquakes.

We listen to her carefully because her homeland - Japan - has adopted that lesson well. Japan is very prone to earthquakes and they are not uncommon there.

"Our country accounts for only 0.25 percent of the total landmass, but statistically nearly 20 percent of earthquakes occur in our country," the ambassador explains. According to the 98-years statistics, Japan records an average of 16 earthquakes with magnitude of six or more annually. For example, in 2019, there were as many as 18 strong earthquakes, but out of that total only six caused damage and there were no deaths. She mentions, as an example, an earthquake of the same magnitude as the one in Petrinja that hit northern Japan in December. She says that no one even spoke about it because there was almost no damage.

How did they come to this? We asked.

The definition is as follows: building a resilient state and community through a combination of "hard" and "soft" measures. The first are anti-seismic construction, fire resistance, landslide prevention measures, earthquake resistant infrastructure. "Soft" measures refer to the readiness of citizens.

Of course, years and years of work are behind them.

"The lesson we learned is that it is not possible to reduce earthquakes, but that it is possible to reduce casualties, alleviate suffering and minimize damage. But to do that, we make a lot of effort. One way was to rebuild, but better. So not just build, but Build Back Better", she explains.

She also remembers the great catastrophe that marked the modern history of her country, the earthquake and the tsunami that devastated Japan in 2011. Croatia and the rest of the world helped a lot then.

"The epicenter was in the middle of the ocean, its magnitude was nine. It was a very large earthquake, but when it reached the mainland its magnitude was about seven in coastal cities. An earthquake of that magnitude only happened in 1995 in the Kobe area. It was devastating, more than six thousand people died," she says.

"When the Fukushima earthquake happened I was going on a business trip so I took off and didn't know what was going on. My final location was Ankara in Turkey and when I was changing plane, I found out what happened. I tried to contact my family, relatives and then I saw a big tsunami on TV. It was very disturbing. The damage from the tsunami was greater than that from the earthquake.", she recalls.

It is important to learn from the situations you are faced with to improve your ability to respond and alleviate vulnerability. For this reason, Japan has decided to share its experience with other countries, among other things through the UN Conference on Natural Disasters held in Yokohama in 1994, then in 2005 in Kobe and in 2015 in Sendai. Every time, he adds, there were more participants. The rest of the world has realized how important good construction is and how much it mitigates damage, especially since natural disasters can jeopardize the development process in some countries.

But Japan, she points out, was not always so ready.

"Until 1950 we suffered systematically and regularly, we had great damage, not only because of earthquakes but also because of big typhoons and things like that. But then we started building a nation in terms of preparedness against natural disasters," she explains. The entire administration is structured in terms of resilience to them, including earthquakes, and 1st of September every year marks the day of the fight against natural disasters when, in terms of training and raising national awareness and preparedness, the Prime Minister and all cabinet members meet, " she says.

We comment her words by saying that one gets the impression that Croatia was not ready for such events. Kaji points out she can understand that.

"Because it happened after 140 years. And then you think there won't be another one, but then another big one happened again. So now you're worried if it could happen in 140 days. But I think you can use that and try to build again in a better way to ensure people continue with their lives and that even earthquakes of magnitude five or six can be overcome, " she adds.

"Earthquakes are not a nice thing, but don't worry. You can live with them," she says.

Given all of the above, this is where the key to current Japanese support and assistance lies, in addition to donations already made by Japanese companies to the affected areas after the accident.

Japan, Ambassador Kaji explains, can help with its experience, knowledge and expertise. Of course, part of the know how such as anti-seismic building needs a budget, but some part is invisible and completely free, as it is the matter of mindset and habit which lead to better preparedness.

"One of important things is for a family to agree on where they will meet in case of an earthquake, in a square or some other location. Your cell phone may not work, but you know that your family members will be there and you can immediately go there," she explains. Or, for example, furniture in the apartment.

"It can be a real weapon, especially in the case of children because when it crashes it can kill them. So make sure you fasten the furniture so it doesn't fall on you in the event of an earthquake," she adds, while the leaflet advises securing cupboard doors containing dishes or glasses with duct tape. And it is advisable to move the car to a safe place. "You shouldn't run around..." the ambassador explains.

But there are also much more systematic aspects of preparedness, such as the education system.

"Exercises are held in schools in Japan, since kindergarten, primary school. Training is being done on how to evacuate properly, how the teacher says which door and which way to use, where the gathering place is ..." she recounts.

Regarding the sharing of this knowledge and expertise, among others in the context of renovation and reconstruction, Ambassador Kaji has concrete proposals and ideas. One suggestion is to establish communication with Japanese experts, for example through a web conference on the topic of administrative planning, but also engineering and construction issues in terms of more economical construction, i.e. building more resistant structures in the future. She shared such ideas with the mayor of Petrinja, whom she visited upon invitation these days.

However, her goal is to include the central Croatian authorities, because, as she says, not only Petrinja and its surroundings have been affected, but damage has also been recorded in Zagreb. They are also reaching out to the University of Zagreb, and the good thing about the web conference, she says, is that you can invite many people at the same time.

She also mentions the example of the Japanese city of Sendai, which suffered great damage in 2011 but has now transformed into a futuristic earthquake-resistant city. The people there are willing to share their experiences with the affected areas and have not forgotten what Croatia did for them when they wrestled with the tragedy, and when Split received the affected children from their area. According to Kaji, this is another example of the relationship between Japan and Croatia as two countries that help each other, both in good and bad times.

As for the construction itself, she emphasizes that Japan has very harsh sanctions in case of non-compliance.

"In the case of illegal construction, companies are fined up to 100 million yen, or \$ 1 million, and individuals three million yen, or \$ 30,000, or three years in prison. These are very severe penalties for violating the basic law on construction criteria," she said.

She also touches on another idea that is hoped to be realized over time, even though it is still at its beginning, and that is the collaboration of the scientific communities of both countries, to study the earthquake issue in a comprehensive way - from geography to the type of materials used for construction to the role of local and central government, all the way to the psychological help for people who suffer.

"How to deal with earthquakes is an interdisciplinary and long-term issue. If you plan a project now, you may get some result in two years, 20 years or even 50 years ... But Croatia, which has a high academic standard and capable experts and engineers, through exchange with Japanese colleagues can find some good solution for itself and maybe apply some Japanese ideas to Croatia. Croatia may not do the same thing as Japan, but it can learn from the Japanese example and work on its own system," she concludes.

During the conversation, we also touched on another inevitable topic - pandemics. "In Croatia it went worse and now you are suppressing the spread of the infection, and in Japan it is growing. But Japan has a population of 120 million, and you have four million, so the population of Japan is 30 times larger. And if compared statistically, Croatia is at 22,000 and Japan at 33,000. So relatively speaking we have somewhat better figures, but the

situation in Japan is not reassuring now. The number of infected people is increasing, and when you host the Olympic and Paralympic Games you really have to suppress the spread and overcome it. At this point, arrivals and departures from the country are suspended, but it can't be that way forever," she explains.

She states that there is currently a debate in Japan about whether the regulations on the suppression of the pandemic should include penalties, as in Croatia.

"Our declaration for emergencies is based on law, but the law is based on trust," she says. As for vaccinations, they will start administering the first doses in late February.

"We want to ensure the safety and validity of vaccines, we always make sure that vaccines are effective and safe. We also work in an instrumental way, of course we bought vaccines for the health of Japanese citizens, but we are also part of a system that should ensure that vaccines reach developing countries. At the end of the day, everyone should be free of Covid in a globalized world," she said, accentuating the importance of immunization in terms of athletes participating in the Olympics and the Paralympics.

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