

Japanese towns reconsider sea walls after deadly tsunami

Calum Macleod, USA Today, 8-12-11

ANEYOSHI, Japan — Taking a cigarette break between underwater dives to blow up the sea wall he helped build as a young man, Toshinori Kazahari considered two minor upsides to Japan's triple-headed disaster of earthquake, tsunami and ongoing nuclear crisis.

There are new fish here, said Kazahari, 50, as his colleague landed a large specimen they guessed was shaken free from an ocean fish farm off Fukushima prefecture further south, home to the damaged nuclear power plant. Plus countless tons of sunken concrete to clear with explosives.

"There'll be enough work for me until I can't move anymore," he said Thursday, with a rueful smile.

Up and down the saw-tooth coastline of Japan's northeast, where more than 20,000 people died March 11, marine demolition crews are breaking up the remains of sea walls big and small built to withstand the tsunamis that have landed here for centuries. Blasted into smaller chunks, other crews can remove these dangers to fishing boats that are the mainstay of local economies.

Less clear is whether the sea walls and breakwaters that surrounded at least 40% of Japan's coastline should be rebuilt, after so many crumbled in the face of nature's fury. At Aneyoshi, a record-breaking 132.5-foot-high wave, taller than Brazil's Christ the Redeemer statue atop a peak in Rio de Janeiro, smashed apart Kazahari's wall, and destroyed the fishing port behind.

Thanks to an old stone tablet on a nearby hillside, erected as a warning after a deadly 1896 tsunami, no Aneyoshi residents erected houses close to the water, and none perished there March 11. But many other communities failed to heed the lessons of history, and lived on the sea-front behind man-made barricades.

Walls have limits

More than 200 residents died in the Taro district of Miyako, to the north of Aneyoshi, where a massive coastal levee, 30 feet high, was built in the 1930s after another deadly tsunami.

"Everyone thought they would be safe, so many did not move from behind the wall," said Manabu Waita, a local businessman.

His cousin Mikako Waita, 58, had heard the post-earthquake loudspeaker warning of a 9-foot-plus tsunami, but she still made what proved a fatal error of going home to collect the family's ancestral tablet, he said.

"I want everyone to tell their children, they must be better prepared," said Waita, 55, who moved his own house to higher ground 20 years ago after his parents warned of the area's frequent tsunamis. "If you feel an earthquake, don't wait for any announcement, just run to higher ground. I'm no scientist, but building a wall will always have limits," he said.

"You can't beat a tsunami just with walls," agreed disaster prevention expert Minoru Watanabe, currently volunteering in Taro. "You need both the hardware of walls and the software of plans to evacuate and people trained to evacuate," he said.

Taro's huge wall, which remains intact unlike most others, was overwhelmed but at least slowed the deadly surge, saving many lives, Watanabe said.

The surviving residents of Taro, most now scattered in temporary housing, gathered Thursday, the disaster's five month anniversary, for a traditional festival welcoming back the spirits of the dead. From a Buddhist

temple just above the zone of destruction, over 2,000 candle-lit lanterns stretched to the sea wall through Taro's now flattened center.

'Prayer for the departed'

Asako Komukai, 63, designed Taro's unique "dream light" lanterns here 10 years ago, using recycled milk cartons and water bottles. On March 11, she escaped uphill to see her house swept away and hear drowning neighbors crying out for help.

"All we could do was watch," she said.

In June, despite the loss of a storehouse packed with materials, Komukai mobilized other evacuees to start making new lanterns.

"I want the town to stand up on its feet and be cheerful again," she said, but won't call Taro home again. "I can't live here anymore, I'm too scared," said Komukai, although Japan's central and local governments are likely to approve rebuilding of sea defenses, if the money can be raised.

On Taro's seafront Thursday, and in several other devastated districts along the northeast coast, annual fireworks shows that were widely expected to be canceled instead went ahead due to the non-profit organization Light Up Nippon, supported by the U.S. Embassy in Japan and other donors.

"It's a prayer for the departed, and something that all victims can remember in their hearts," said local organizer Yasuhiro Kobayashi, 36, who lost three school friends in the tsunami.

Amid the excited screams of children, and smiles from every age group, Shizue Kawamura, 75, whose home vanished in the tsunami, considered the fireworks to be money well-spent. "It's so loud, all the people who died can hear it in heaven," she said.