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Indian relief team responds to local needs in tsunami-hit town

By Tomohiro Deguchi and Junko Horiuchi

ONAGAWA, Japan, April 3 Kyodo - From a pile of debris over 10 meters high, the body of Junko Sato was carefully removed by an Indian rescue and relief team Saturday in the tsunami-hit town of Onagawa, Miyagi Prefecture. Her son Yuki Yoshi, 38, cried out at the sight of her, "Sorry, mom, sorry I left you."

The 46-member National Disaster Response Force from India, which arrived in Japan on March 28 on its first relief operation overseas, has taken charge of the search for people still missing in the town after the March 11 tsunami as well as recovery of bodies and clearing away of debris.

The team's leader, Commandant Alok Avasthy, said that while it was too late for the group to save people's lives, it had many tasks ahead of it. "After seeing the devastation caused by the earthquake and the tsunami there's still a lot of work to be done," he said.

The tsunami following the magnitude 9.0 earthquake reached as far as around a kilometer inland from the port of Onagawa, destroying the center of the town and leaving more than 1,000 people dead or missing out of the town's population of about 10,000.

The team was able to recover 59-year-old Junko's body in the Aratate district after Taichi Watanabe, 26, and three other volunteer interpreters found out that Yuki Yoshi had been continuously searching for the bodies of his mother and of his 87-year-old grandfather Keiji Ishimori in the area.

Avasthy, 41, then ordered his men to comb through the pile of debris identified by Yuki Yoshi.

Yuki Yoshi said his mother's cry for help as she was being washed away by the tsunami still rings in his ears. "Even if I'm tired and ready to go to sleep, I wake up recalling my mother's cry for help,"

he said. He also pictures her arm reaching out of the water in a desperate attempt to hold on to something, the last sight he had of her alive.

The NDRF was set up in 2005 following the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami. The force has 10 battalions around India, each with about 1,000 members. "As India's presence in the international community has become larger due to its economic growth, it also has begun to be active in international contributions," a Japanese government official said.

Inspector Ajay Kumar, a member of the team who spent two and a half months doing relief work in India during the Indian Ocean disaster, said that the Indian team is well trained and is a dedicated force focused on dealing with natural, chemical, nuclear and biological disasters.

"So many devastations came in one moment, it was an unbelievable phenomenon, a mega disaster" said Kumar, referring to last month's quake and tsunami that have left over 27,000 people dead or missing in northeastern and eastern Japan.

The Indian government has supplied Japan with 25,000 blankets and 13,000 bottles of water, and is one of the 23 countries and regions to have dispatched rescue teams or experts to Japan to help deal with the natural disaster or the nuclear crisis in Fukushima Prefecture, according to the Japanese Foreign Ministry.

The Indian team, which had recovered five bodies as of Saturday, is scheduled to wrap up its relief operation Wednesday.

"I can't express what I am seeing. We underwent training for this...but all the scenes (here) are unique, beyond imagination," said Avasthy, who has a 17-year career in the field.

"Japan is a dedicated, disciplined country, sincere country. They have proved (so) previously. I am 100 percent sure (the Japanese people) will make those cities even more beautiful cities, very early, very early, of that I am sure," he said.

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