

The Awaji Earthquake of 1995: A Story of Tragedy and Hope

It was a peaceful morning on January 17, 1995. People in Awaji Island and Kobe were going about their usual routines some were still asleep, others getting ready for work or school. No one expected that in just moments, their world would be turned upside down.

At exactly 5:46 AM, the ground suddenly started shaking violently. A massive earthquake struck, with its center on Awaji Island. Within seconds, buildings swayed and collapsed, bridges cracked, and roads split apart. The once sturdy structures fell like houses of cards.

The tremors spread quickly to Kobe, a busy port city. Streets were ripped apart, highways crumbled, and train lines snapped. Families woke up in terror as their homes came crashing down. Many were trapped under debris, and fires broke out due to broken gas lines, spreading rapidly and engulfing entire neighbourhoods.

The shaking lasted for just twenty seconds, but the destruction it left behind was unimaginable. Smoke filled the sky, and the cries of people calling for help echoed through the ruins. In the end, around 6,434 people lost their lives, and hundreds of thousands were injured or left homeless.

Rescue teams rushed to help, but the damage made it hard to reach those in need. Roads were blocked, phone lines were down, and confusion spread. Despite the chaos, Japan took important lessons from the disaster. Building codes were improved to make structures stronger, emergency response plans became better organized, and new early warning systems were put in place to help prevent future tragedies.

Today, Kobe has rebuilt itself, standing as a symbol of strength and determination. The city honors the memory of those lost and continues to use the lessons from 1995 to stay prepared for the future. The Awaji Earthquake was more than just a disaster it was a wake up call that made Japan stronger and more resilient against the forces of nature.

Mustapha Ahmad Muhammad

Nigeria

Kobe Institute of Computing

Japan's Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake Teaches the Giant of Africa Key Lessons on Disaster Preparedness, 30 Years Later

Editorial Piece by Talatu Clara Y. Tarfa, JICA Scholar (Supported by JICA and Yomiuri Shimbun Newspaper, Japan)

Disasters can happen at any time. The island country of Japan, well known around the world for its highly functional technology and popular tourist destinations is also described as a disaster archipelago due to its geographical location. The country's long history has been punctuated by earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, typhoons and volcanic eruptions dating as far back as 5,300 BC. As a result, the government spends a lot of time, effort and resources towards disaster preparedness, a Japanese concept known as *bousai* 防災.

January 17th, 2025 marked the 30th memorial of the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake in Hyogo Prefecture of Japan. The memorial was characterized by luminary events throughout the major cities of Awaji, Kobe and Akashi where many gathered to say prayers and light candles to honour loved ones lost. In schools across the area, songs of remembrance were sung and children, though not born at the time, understand the loss and often feel the sadness of a tragedy that once happened in the place they call home.

The earthquake, which was officially named *Hyogoken Nambu Jishin* by the Japan Meteorological Agency, took place unexpectedly on a Tuesday morning at 5.46am and amounted to 40 seconds of intense seismic activity. The result? A death toll of 6,434 with over 45,000 persons displaced. It is considered one of the worst earthquakes in the history of Japan till date and cost the city well over \$100million in damages.

Mixed emotions often mark the commemoration of the earthquake every year, but with each time comes the opportunity to reflect and learn as it sheds light on salient lessons which may have otherwise been unknown or simply forgotten with the passage of time. Mr Mori Yasushige, a resident and teacher at the agricultural high school of Toshima city in Old Hokudan-cho, which was the epicenter of the magnitude 7.3 earthquake, tells a heartfelt story of the impact of the earthquake to his life and family, the small city of Toshima and the Awaji Senior High School where he taught.

His account was quite vivid even after 30 years as he shared his story of the wreckage at the Hokudan Earthquake Memorial Park and Museum in Awaji Island City. Till this day, the 10km Nojima fault and other effects of the earthquake are preserved at the museum. This includes a piece of resilient infrastructure called the Kobe wall, which was originally located in the market area in Kobe city. The towering artefact had survived, not only the Great Hanshin-Awaji earthquake and fire that broke out after, but also five air raids on the city during World War II in 1945.

One of the recurring regrets surrounding this catastrophic occurrence was that many were not prepared for such a disaster. A victim, in his account as archived in the Disaster Reduction and Human Renovation Intervention (DRI) Center located in the heart of Kobe

city, stated that he had once raised the issue concerning preparedness for an earthquake in his residence association meeting during the 'free question and answer' session. This implies that it was not initially on the meeting's agenda.

Unfortunately, his concerns were quickly discarded, stating that it was not a priority for the association since a disaster of that nature had not occurred before in the quiet and peaceful Port City of Kobe. 15 years later, his home would become part of the rubble from the severe earthquake which was piled and burned at the city center during the post-disaster clean-up phase.

Akin to the resident association above, disaster preparedness is left out of many discussions and agendas today. Oftentimes, disaster-readiness is not considered to be a priority until after a disaster has occurred and left a trail of loss of lives and properties. This is not only risky at best but also poses to be more injurious to the situation at hand. We need to take disaster preparedness seriously, with a clear contingency plan created for such unexpected events. Thankfully, we can take a few pages out of this carefully written *book*, from a well-experienced *author*.

According to Prof. Tomio Saito, the former Vice Governor of Hyogo Prefecture and a firsthand witness of the Great Awaji-Hanshin earthquake, there needs to be both a 'soft and a hard approach' to disaster preparedness. Public awareness creation and education sum up the soft category while the hard would address issues of infrastructure resilience. He also added that the local or city governments in each prefecture receive maximum support in times of disaster as they the first responders and engage closely with the residents.

All across the country of Japan, disaster preparedness targets both infrastructure and culture and truly no one is left out of the planning process. From the Central to the City governments, to homes and schools, systems, processes and resources are put in place to ensure effective disaster management. Even foreigners are not left out of the management plan as there is a silent understanding that disaster is a risk to all.

While it is true that the Giant of Africa does not experience earthquakes, Nigeria has had her fair share of disasters such as flooding, drought, landslides and soil erosion, all of which are further exacerbated by climate change. As the most populous country in Africa – a population surpassing that of Japan by over 100 million – and a population density of up to 7,000 persons per square kilometer in the nation's populated cities, we certainly have much to lose if a disaster occurs.

Rather than make estimations, let us redirect our minds to the most recent flooding disaster which affected about one million residents and displaced over 200,000 people in North-Eastern Borno State of Nigeria in September 2024. The flooding, which was triggered by a collapsed dam, left half of the capital city of Maiduguri submerged under water. Interestingly, this flooding disaster is described as the worst in 30 years in the region.

Stakeholders till this day are passing blame as to the cause of the flooding and whose responsibility it was to avert the catastrophe, but whether it was caused by a faulty dam

infrastructure or was an *act of god*, the effects remain devastating, with much damage to infrastructure. The issue is particularly compounded as the North-Eastern region has been on a recovery path from over a decade of insurgency

Many, however, do agree that the unfortunate disaster could have been avoided with an infrastructural upgrade. Thus, it has been most refreshing to see the North-East Development Commission (NEDC) rising to the task and taking the lead in the rebuilding of the Alau Dam following a thorough assessment and evaluation, and a clean-up of the area. The timely reconstruction of the dam is crucial to preventing future flooding, ensuring the safety of residents and furthermore ensuring water security for the drought-prone region.

This is only one of several incidents and all indications show that if we continue to postpone the implementation of disaster management practices and consider it to be solely the responsibility of a select few, then we will always be the victims in our own story. We are also quick to forget the global issue that is climate change. The struggle to keep pace with the changes is real and we risk being overtaken by its consequences, with the vulnerable populations suffering the most.

Disaster preparedness remains the best approach to managing disasters and can significantly boost the resilience of communities and countries great and small, but it remains the work of a collective and calls for a co-ordinated and systematic approach, which entails investment in resilient infrastructure and the education of the public. At the base of this all should lie a heart for the people and humanity. This certainly provides a concise summary of three decades of learning after the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake.



Flooding disaster in Maiduguri, Borno State in September 2024. Source: Aljazeera



Kobe Wall at the Hokudan Earthquake Memorial Park and Museum. Source: Awaji Holic