

Team of Japanese specialists visiting a landslide site to collect information directly from local residents at the damaged site.



Lessons from Japan for a Safer Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka faces ongoing threats from natural disasters including floods, landslides, and droughts. The entire country is working to develop a disaster-prevention plan to protect the nation and establish a safer society. Japan is using its experience and lessons learned from its own past floods and droughts to help make Sri Lanka a safer country.

SLOW RESPONSE TO FLOOD AND LANDSLIDE DAMAGE MORE THAN ONE MILLION VICTIMS

In Sri Lanka, more than 20 million people live on the Island of Ceylon. The northern area of Ceylon is a plain and the central and southern areas are mountainous. The climates are completely different, too: The north is dry and the south is humid. The living environments are also distinct. Agriculture relies on the once-yearly rainy season and reservoirs in the north and double cropping in the south, thanks to abundant water. Disasters on the island represent those local characteristics: floods, landslides and droughts.

The most frequent disasters are floods and landslides, which affect the largest number of people. Of all the disasters in the past 10 years, 37% have been floods, and 35% of deaths and missing persons were due to landslides caused by rain. The scale of flood damage, which frequently affects urban areas, is becoming larger each year. At the same time, landslides occur more in rural areas, taking human lives.

The last few years have seen repeated floods. In December of 2014, there were 31 dead or missing, with 1.03 million persons affected overall; May 2016 saw 217 dead or missing, with 460,000 persons affected; and in 2017, there were 290 dead or missing, with 600,000 persons affected. Although aware of the disaster risks, the government of Sri Lanka took measures only after the disasters had occurred. The National Council for Disaster Management and the Disaster Management Act were developed after the 2004 Sumatra Earthquake, which killed 220,000 people in Asian countries including Sri Lanka. However, the establishment of a culture of disaster risk reduction still has a long way to go.

Japan provided various kinds of support when Sri Lanka was stricken. In response to the damage caused by the heavy rains that continued for two months in April and May of 2017, Japan provided emergency relief goods and dispatched Japan Disaster Relief team of experts for local surveying. Based on the surveyors' results, Japan made suggestions to the Sri Lankan government and administrative organizations, including the Executive Office of the President, concerning mid-to-long term measures as well



Bird's eye view of the area affected by the flood in May of 2016. Water covers part of the road.

as short-term ones. Takayuki Nagai, a JICA expert and a Disaster Risk Reduction Advisor for Sri Lanka, says, "Full cooperation, including Air Force helicopters, was provided for the survey."

INITIATIVE WITH A LONG-TERM PERSPECTIVE TO MAKE THE NATION SAFER

Like Sri Lanka, Japan has also experienced damage from floods caused by typhoons. JICA decided to draw on Japan's accumulated experience with disaster risk reduction to try to reduce the impact of disasters in Sri Lanka and make the country safer. To do so, JICA helped develop a national initiative for disaster risk reduction called "the Roadmap for Disaster Risk Reduction" to suggest measures that Sri Lanka should take.

The initiative was motivated by the heavy rains in May of 2016, which caused floods and landslides. Japan provided emergency-relief goods for that disaster as well, and, as a result of discussions with the minister and government officials in charge of disaster risk reduction, all parties realized the importance of funding for disasters, development of mid-to-long-term policies, and mainstreaming of disaster risk reduction. Special priority was given to the idea encapsulated by the phrase "build back better." The Sri Lankan government was highly motivated by the philosophy of rebuilding a safer community and one that was more resistant to disasters instead of reconstructing the same one as before. The idea of supporting social development was the seed for the development of a specific plan.

In addition to JICA members and consultants, Ambassador Kenichi Suganuma, who was Japan's representative at the UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Sendai in 2015, participated in the development of the Roadmap. From the Sri Lankan side, a diverse group of people participated in the project, including specialists in disaster management, national land management officers from the Ministry of Irrigation and Water Resources, and members of the Department of National Planning.

JICA expert Nagai says, "To aid continuous progress and maintain economic growth in Sri Lanka, where natural disasters occur frequently, it is neces-

sary to reduce disaster risks in every sector." He says that this philosophy, based on the idea of "build back better," seems to be embraced by more Sri Lankans at each conference. The approach of preventing new risks follows guidelines laid out in the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction. They include investing actively in the disaster risk reduction sector, aiming to reduce the damage caused by disasters, researching disaster risk in each area, and preventing the construction of residences and industrial estates in areas with inundation risks. These concepts all fall under the idea of positive investment in disaster risk reduction, laid out in the Roadmap for Disaster Risk Reduction, which incorporates the goals of promoting a disaster risk reduction plan in areas prone to floods, landslides, and droughts; constructing an early warning system; and establishing water resource management that includes disaster risk reduction as well as water utilization. The disaster risk reduction plan aims to develop a plan for wide-area water supply for each river basin, promote large-scale land use and infrastructure improvements at the national and state levels, and take risks into consideration at the municipal level. The ultimate goal is to create a society that is multilaterally resistant to disasters.

Based on the Roadmap for Disaster Risk Reduction, Japan is considering mid-to-long-term support for Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan government itself intends to reflect the recommended contents of the Roadmap in the 5-year national disaster risk reduction plan covering the period from 2018 to 2023. International organizations including the World Bank are also showing interest in the Roadmap, and there have been many international inquiries about Japan's experience with disaster measures and support know-how. "I think that Sri Lanka's disaster risk reduction system is gradually improving, thanks in part to Japan's support," says Nagai. "As the proper people in Sri Lanka are now enthusiastic about disaster risk reduction, we expect further strengthening of the disaster risk reduction system."

Nagai is currently focused on increasing disaster awareness and active participation by the general public instead of the government. He says, "Natural phenomena vary depending on the area, and it is impossible to discuss these matters in a general way." He emphasizes, "What works, in the end, is the power of local residents." Establishing a culture of disaster risk reduction and building a country resistant to disasters are vital steps to ensuring further prosperity for Sri Lanka.



Floods and landslides are exacting a great economic and human toll in Sri Lanka. The disasters occur because of the land's abundant water.



When Nagai was dispatched to Sri Lanka in July 2017, Minister Yapa himself organized a meeting to discuss technical support.