

## **A Report on** **Fellowship Exchange Program 2011**

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Last June, AMCTO was fortunate to receive an invitation to participate in a local government exchange and cooperation seminar from the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations. On October 22 last, I began a journey that comes once in a life time.

The trip was long and tiring approximately 14 hours in the air and there was a time adjustment to deal with (13 hours) but was well worth it. We did not know what to expect when we started our journey but we soon found out how informative and passionate the presenters were in each of the sessions we attended. On our first day, several presentations on the political structure in Japan and later in the day, we were exposed to the disaster of the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami. These sessions were very moving but it did not fully prepare us for when we actually visited some of the disaster sites.

First site visited was the municipality of Minami Sanriku-cho of approximately 18,000 people. The disaster coordinator Mr. Sato was our guide of the site and you can feel his pain for his residents who are recovering from the disaster. One of the comments that stood out during his presentation was that "the surviving residents are asking themselves why did I survive and not my neighbor". In Ishinomaki City, our study group was very impressed by the temporary housing for the disaster victims and how coordinated and quickly it was constructed. There was a section of 11,000 units we visited with an average of 400 square feet per unit for a family. These units are of a row housing type and are expected to be in place for a period of two years; however, the officials we met believe that the temporary housing will be in place for five years. The major obstacle for the type of housing will be the upcoming winter which the units are not properly insulated.

The disaster in Sendai City airport and port were unbelievable and the recovery plan is in full action. Sendai City has a population of 1 million and its local economy is strongly dependent on being able to move merchandise to and from their port and airport. Both the airport and port were completely submerged by the tsunami and the shore of the port dropped by .6 meter. We saw where ship containers were tossed like twigs and even a tanker ship still grounded on the main land a thousand feet away from the port.

Also, we were introduced to the beauty of Japan and its wonderful cultural sites. Miyagi prefecture is a beautiful part of the country with its breathtaking landscape and hidden

treasures such as Matsushima Bay along the shores of the Pacific Ocean, the Zuiganji temple and I cannot forget Iwanumaya, where I experienced a traditional Japanese style Inn and hot spring bath "Onsen". Matsushima Bay is a small city which was spared by the tsunami because of the thousand of small islands that are in the large bay that absorbed the force of the tsunami. The ultimate experience was Tokyo with its 13 million residents and interesting sectors such Asakusa which we saw the Kaminarimon gate, the famous Nakamise Street with all their vendors, and Sensoji temple, Shibuya, the rodeo drive of Tokyo, the national government legislature called the DIET and many more sites.

3.11 stands for the Great East Japan Earthquake with a magnitude of 9.0., seismic intensity of 7 and a Tsunami of 8.8 meters high, flooding 327 square kilometers, 72,970 residences destroyed and 78,674 heavily damaged 13 billion dollars of damage costs to public infrastructure and 15,000-16000 deaths. In my visit, I saw the disaster relief in motion and there are still lots of work to do. However, it is the people that I will remember with their stories, their commitment to surpass this tragedy and to help each other.

I learned a few Japanese words during my visit but the one word that stuck with me and I will never forget was shared by the disaster relief workers;

**"KIZUNA"** which translates to **"Bond of People"**

In the next few months , I will post on our AMCTO web page a more detailed account of the my trip along with additional information on local government in Japan, their disaster relief actions and my experiences during my trip. **Let's not forget the victims of this disaster.**

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