

Pillar in a Perfect Storm

In the worst of situations, Brad Morrison, working in Japan at the time of the tsunami, delivered exemplary service to Canadians who had nowhere else to turn.

The call from the Canadian embassy came at 9 a.m. on March 13, 2011—two days after the earthquake and the ensuing tsunami. Could Brad Morrison be at the Australian embassy in two hours to travel with an Australian team to the Sendai region, the area most affected by the tsunami, to be Canada's face at the epicentre of the disaster?

Morrison, who at the time worked for the embassy as an assistant migration officer supporting the Canada Border Services Agency, was still in bed after running to exhaustion the previous day helping Canadian travellers who were stranded at Narita International Airport, just outside Tokyo.

But there was no question he would go. As someone with prior consular experience, he had already volunteered, he spoke fluent Japanese, and he knew that there were around 500 Canadian citizens in the affected area who might need help in the aftermath of this devastating natural disaster. "With a crisis of this scope, if you can help, you help."

The March earthquake was the second strongest in modern history, releasing 600 million times the energy of the Hiroshima bomb. The tsunami that followed, rushing inland on the coastal flats, killed 16,000 people, injured 6,000 and left 3,800 missing. More than 125,000 buildings were damaged or destroyed. Three nuclear reactors, partly submerged in sea water, were on the brink of a meltdown. For Japan's then-prime minister, Naoto Kan, the emergency was "the greatest hardship for the people of Japan since World War II."

The Australian team, accompanied by Morrison and an officer from New Zealand's embassy, arrived in Sendai in the evening and established temporary headquarters in a meeting room of a private company. Central Sendai was "eerily quiet," Morrison later recalled. "All of the stores and restaurants were closed. There were still aftershocks of the earthquake."

When the group went to the emergency headquarters in Sendai, they were surprised to learn that authorities had not sent any search and rescue personnel into the most affected coastal areas. Tsunami warnings were still in effect, and authorities told them no one would have survived in the coastal towns anyway.

The next day, the group visited several coastal cities. In Ishinomaki, people were "shell-shocked and weeping in the streets." In one hospital where he was searching for Canadian nationals, Morrison remembers talking to a Japanese woman who was looking for her two daughters and her mother, whom she had not seen since the tsunami. She had been touring hospitals and emergency centres but had not found them. At the evacuation centres, Morrison saw many elderly people sleeping on concrete floors with nothing more than thin blankets for cover.



Brad Morrison (left) and the head of the Australian team, Paul Molloy
photo: DFAIT