

Tokai University European Center

Lecture Series 2017

March 14

“From Catastrophe to Comradeship: how the Great East Japan Earthquake tied Japan and Denmark closer together”

By Ambassador Franz-Michael Skjold Mellbin



On March 14, Tokai University European Center (TUEC) hosted a lecture commemorating six years having passed since the Great East Japan Earthquake struck in 2011. Since the disaster, TUEC has cooperated with the Denmark-Japan Society on arranging annual lectures for a local Danish audience to mark the occasion. Along with being a show of sympathy and support for Japan, the “3/11 lecture series” also functions as a running update on the rebuilding process and an information source reporting on how many aspects of Japanese society have been affected by the disaster.

With 2017 being the 150th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Denmark and Japan, former Danish ambassador to Japan from 2008-2011, Franz-Michael Skjold Mellbin, was invited as speaker and the lecture was included as part of the Embassy of Japan’s official anniversary calendar for 2017 in Denmark. Ambassador Mellbin spoke of how the Danish embassy had dealt with the situation in Japan after the Great East Japan Earthquake struck on March 11, 2011, and describing the threefold nature of the disaster (earthquake, tsunami and Fukushima), he commented on the human, logistic, political and communicative consequences and challenges that arose in its aftermath.

The lecture highlighted the importance of “taking action” in a crisis situation, and described how the Danish embassy proactively took the initiative in locating and contacting all Danish citizens present in Japan, and managed to account for everyone within the short time span of 72 hours. Having accomplished this so quickly, the embassy freed up considerable time and energy which instead could be channeled into helping the Japanese - such as raising much needed money for the relief effort.

Danish disaster-relief focused primarily on Higashi-Matsushima (percentage-wise the hardest hit area) and was motivated by a desire to help the local children. The ambassador delivered a large donation, raised by Danish companies and businessmen, to the mayor of Higashi-Matsushima in person. The money was earmarked for school busses hired in to transport local children to schools outside the stricken area for their daily classes.

The embassy was also involved in arranging for Denmark's Crown Prince Frederik to visit Japan, and he also made the journey up to Higashi-Matsushima to see the damage for himself and meet the local people. Both the monetary donation and the Crown Prince's visit to Higashi-Matsushima drew extensive media coverage in Japan, and in addition to being excellent PR for Denmark, paved the way for the development of strong ties between Denmark and Higashi-Matsushima. These initial ties have since matured into various forms of cooperation, but in essence they originate from a human impulse to offer help in time of need. The lecturer recalled with admiration the dedication of the residents of Higashi-Matsushima in carrying out relief work, despite the fatigue and stress they were under, not to mention the burden of grief many had to cope with at the same time.

The lecture drew a full house at Tokai University European Center with a lively post-lecture Q&A session. All in all, it was an informative, insightful and entertaining event, at the same time marking the 150-year diplomatic anniversary between Denmark and Japan, as well as commemorating the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011.

Bio:

Franz-Michael Skjold Mellbin has been a professional Danish foreign service officer since 1985, and was Denmark's ambassador to Japan from 2008-2011.

Since 2013, he has been part of EU's foreign service (European External Action Service) as the European Union's Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan.