

## POSTCARD FROM JAPAN

## It takes a newsroom to educate



Amitabh Sharma

SENDAI, Japan:

**M**ARCH 11, 2011, is still embedded in Shinichi Takeda's mind. It was the day when the earthquake and tsunami struck Sendai city. Five and a half years on when he speaks, it seems as if the disaster struck yesterday.

Like the tens of thousands in the Miyagi prefecture who endured physical and emotional trauma, the head of disaster risk

reduction, education section, Kahoku Shimpō Publishing Company, says he learnt a valuable lesson that fateful afternoon.

Their newspaper had failed to educate the population to handle disasters of this magnitude.

"It is not enough and ineffective if we inform our readers about the happening at the time when a disaster strikes," Takeda said. "We need to give our readers constant information on how to prepare and be safe."

"If there was a sustained effort to educate our readers and the wider population," Takeda said, "the loss to human life would



Second-grade students at Shichigo Elementary School drop to the floor and go into a protective posture to show what they would do during an earthquake.

have been considerably less."

The 2011 earthquake and tsunami claimed 20,000 lives. There are 2,500 people unaccounted for, and 27 vendors of **Kahoku Shimpō** also died.

Takeda and his staff at Sendai's largest daily lived through the earthquake and the resultant tsunami to ensure that the newspaper was delivered to their subscribers the next morning.

"We suffered extensive damage," Takeda said. "The office building was inundated, ceilings had fallen, and there were cracks on the wall. Twenty seven of our news vendors and distribution staff lost their lives." Two of the paper's branch offices were swept away and the systems were shut down.

Two editorial staff drove 300km to a newspaper in Niigata on the western coast of Japan to plan and design the pages for the March 12 edition of the **Kahoku Shimpō**.

It was a logistics nightmare, and given the unprecedented scale of the disaster, the emotional price was high. Takeda, who was the chief Reporter then, stayed in the office for a month.

Post the tsunami, the newspaper set up a disaster risk-reduction unit with a mandate to educate the people.

The realisation that they failed on several fronts came after **Kahoku Shimpō** surveyed

people living in shelters on whether the newspaper stories had helped readers to be prepared for disaster — 72 per cent said no.

The newspaper took the lead and reached out to the communities to prepare them, organising seminars in schools and companies. Around 60 organisations and 120 people are currently involved, Takeda said.

**SHARING EXPERIENCES**

"The workshops serve as an opportunity for people to share their experiences," he said. These interactions, he said, give people a chance speak, and local newspapers are best suited for this role. His newspaper also organises round-table meetings with universities, corporate bodies and media organisations. These interactions are then published.

One elderly reader, he shared, managed to save his life by going to an elevated highway after recalling an article he had read in **Kahoku Shimpō** advising people to move to higher ground when a tsunami warning is given.

"It feels good to hear such stories," Takeda said. "We would like to save more lives by educating people."

Life goes on in Sendai, bustling, bubbling, and rolling under the psychedelic signage and vibrant shopping plazas.



PHOTOS BY FLOYD K. TAKEUCHI/WAKA PHOTOS

Shinichi Takeda of the Kahoku Shimbun in Sendai, Japan.

Sitting in his offices, Takeda said media has a larger role to play than news dissemination, and it should be the mandate and onus of newsrooms to turn their energies to educating their readers.

"It is important to be proactive and make your readers be prepared should a disaster strike," he said. "It is a great pain to see people lose their lives."

"I don't want this to happen again," Takeda said.

Shimpō Publishing is Sendai's largest circulated daily, with their morning edition

reaching 450,000 and the evening paper selling 70,000 copies.

"The disaster is not over for us," he said.

■ *The visit to Japan was part of the Pacific Islands and Caribbean Journalists' Programme organised by the Tokyo-based Association for Promotion of International Cooperation (APIC), with support from the Foreign Press Center, Japan. Email: amitabh.sharma@hotmail.com*



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**The Council and Staff of the University Council of Jamaica welcome the appointment of Mrs Althea Heron, as Executive Director, effective November 21, 2016.**


Mrs Althea Heron is a career Public Servant with over 25 years of combined experience in the fields of education, environment and tourism management. She has held senior directorship positions in the Ministry of Tourism and is an experienced practitioner in strategic planning and evaluation, policy development and analysis, results based management and research.

A graduate of the Mico Teachers' College, Mrs Heron is a former teacher, tutor of Geography and guest lecturer of Tourism. She has held the positions of adjunct supervisor of major research projects in Hospitality and Tourism Management, and Urban and Regional Planning.

Mrs Heron holds a Master of Philosophy Degree in Geography from the University of the West Indies; a Post Graduate Diploma in Public Sector Senior Management from the Management Institute for National Development (MIND); and a Master of Business Administration Degree from the Florida International University.

A former student of the St Jago High School, she has made presentations on resource management and sustainable tourism at local and international conferences and workshops. She has also published papers examining issues pertaining to the sustainability of rural livelihoods in Jamaican communities.

Mrs Heron is a member of the Webster Memorial United Church and a long standing member of the Jamaica Conservation and Development Trust, and the Jamaican Geographical Society.



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