

News from Under the Southern Cross (Edition 54): Assistance for Tonga

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Japan-Australia cooperation continues to advance following the volcanic eruption in the South Pacific island nation of Tonga. Today I'd like to provide a situational report about this.

1. “How are you?”

The Embassy owned Ambassador's Residence in Canberra is closely guarded 24 hours day and night by security personnel. I am certainly grateful to all of the guards for their dedication to their work. While I always make an effort to talk with the guards whenever I enter or exit the Residence gate, there are two female guards who take the initiative to speak to me in Japanese before I speak to them. Both of them are originally from Tonga.

Everyday I'm greeted with a cheerful “*O-genki desu ka?*” (‘how are you?’) reminiscent of Inoki Antonio (*note: a famous Japanese wrestler and politician known for his exuberant use of the above greeting*), which always puts a spring in my step.



(Photo: This is Eleni, who works as a security guard at the Embassy of Japan in Australia

(Source: Embassy of Japan in Australia))

2. A major volcanic eruption

As you are aware, on 15 January a major undersea volcanic eruption occurred in Tonga. I heard that the subsequent tsunami even reached the coastline of far-off Japan. The sheer scale of the effects caused by the volcano made me realise the seriousness of the situation.

The current Japanese ambassador to Tonga, Ambassador MUNENAGA Kensaku, and I undertook the training session for heads of mission in Tokyo together before we took up our

respective posts. He's my senior at Kasumigaseki (i.e., he joined the public service before me) and is originally from the Ministry of Finance. I was anxious about his well-being and attempted to contact him, but both email and telephone communication between Australia and Tonga had been severed. After a number of days, I was finally able to establish a connection with him.



(Photo: The Prime Minister of Tonga, Ambassador MUNENAGA and associated officials greet the arrival of the Japan Self-Defense Forces (Source: The Embassy of Japan in Tonga))

3. Send in the SDF!

As communications with Tonga had been severed, the nearby nations of Australia and New Zealand were the first to act in providing assistance, which by now had been smothered in volcanic ash. While neither Australia nor New Zealand suffered any particular damage from either the eruption or the tsunami, they are both members of the same South Pacific network as Tonga. As demonstrated by having Tongans among the security personnel at the Embassy and Residence, people-to-people relationships can be profound.

Fortunately, thanks to the tremendous effort of staff in Tokyo, the SDF were also able to follow Australia and New Zealand in delivering aid to Tonga.

In the air, this consisted of the dispatch of two C-130H transport aircraft. After flying from Japan to RAAF base Amberley near Brisbane, they undertook two supply missions from Amberley to Tonga. The first mission consisted of delivering 3 tonnes of drinking water. The second mission, in addition to delivering another 2 tonnes of drinking water, also resulted in the delivery of 20 high-pressure cleaning devices, as well as respirator masks, gloves and goggles. Two C-2 transport planes, the pride of Japan's air transport manufacturing industry, have also been sent out from Japan, and are engaged in transporting supplies between Japan and Australia.

On the sea, the transport ship JS 'Ōsumi' has been loaded with two landing craft air cushion (LCAC) vessels, two CH-47 helicopters, another 60 high-pressure cleaning devices and 10

tonnes of drinking water. It is currently making its way to Tonga, and will probably be very warmly welcomed upon its arrival there.



(Photo: The transport ship JS 'Ōsumi' leaves port, bound for Tonga (Source: Ministry of Defense))

4. Cooperation between Japan, Australia and other like-minded partners

An international coordination centre was set-up in Australia in order to coordinate assistance from various countries involved in the humanitarian and disaster-response mission to Tonga. There, staff from Japan have remained in close coordination with their counterparts from Australia, New Zealand, the US, the UK, France and Fiji in order to arrange for the delivery of necessary aid to Tonga as well as to monitor the disaster situation and coordinate local activities.



(Photo: Local coordination centre officials are greeted upon their arrival at Canberra Airport by Commodore Lybrand (RAN) of the ADF Joint Headquarters Operations Command (Source: Embassy of Japan in Australia))

The resident Defence Attaché to the Embassy of Japan to Australia, Captain ASO Reona JMSDF, was included among the crew that flew in the aforementioned first C-130H mission from Amberley to Tonga. We are fortunate at the Embassy of Japan in Australia, to have, in

addition to attachés from each of the SDF services of ground (land), sea, and air, a representative counsellor from the Ministry of Defense. We have made great efforts to take advantage of this arrangement in order to ensure the smooth delivery of assistance to Tonga.

When I myself reported on Japan's assistance to senior Australian government officials, not only did they point out the importance of the contribution being made by Japan to assist Tonga, they also greatly welcomed this assistance as a symbolic example of cooperation between Japan and Australia.



(Photo: SDF crew making arrangements with members of the ADF at RAAF Base Amberley)
(Source: the Australian Department of Defence (L), the Ministry of Defense (R))

5. The struggle against COVID-19

One of the difficulties of the current mission is not only the sheer scale of the destruction caused by the eruption, but also the fact that aid must be delivered in the midst of the COVID pandemic. Tonga has strict border measures in place, and those personnel who are needed to deliver aid are not allowed to come into contact with members of the Tongan side.



(Photo: Crew being greeted on arrival (Source: MOD), supplying drinking water (Source: MOD))

Moreover, the infectiousness of the omicron variant has led to outbreaks of positive cases among members of both the ADF and SDF who are involved in providing assistance to Tonga. While

it is a difficult task to provide effective aid within the tight restraints of the current situation, both Japan and Australia are working together right now to meet this challenge.

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