

EDITORIAL

Crisis calls for a drastic change

Japanese politics during the past 10 days has revealed an inherent lack of genuine consideration for the welfare of the citizens. People have witnessed, with disgust and anger, a political performance which looked as if it was intended to be a grandstand play rather than a sincere effort. The most prominent example of such behavior was the almost ritual delivery by the prime minister of his policy speech and the complacent presentation of an opposition position, which was conducted earlier this week at the outset of the just-opened ordinary session of the Diet.

Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama simply read straight from a policy document composed by bureaucrats. Of course, he devoted many words to measures the government would take to alleviate the sufferings of the earthquake victims in the Kansai region. But his pledges were void of concreteness from which the people in Kobe or anywhere else could get much of an encouraging message.

His speech was followed by an oration by Mr. Toshiki Kaifu, a former Liberal Democratic prime minister and now head of the opposition Shinshinto (New Frontier Party), who departed from the usual practice of questioning the premier about his policy message and spouted off an opposition version of a policy speech. He asked only one question about the reason for the government's rejection of a Shinshinto proposal that the Diet take a 10-day recess in order to allow the government to concentrate on quake relief efforts.

Mr. Murayama simply said the proposed adjournment would not help the government and the Diet jointly tackle relief and reconstruction measures. His 40-minute address, thus, was almost totally ignored by Mr. Murayama, who stated that Mr. Kaifu only offered an expression of opinion and proposals (but not on the question of the disaster in Kansai). In fact, Mr. Murayama mechanically read a dreary bureaucratic composition while Mr. Kaifu stuck to a performance arranged before the killer earthquake devastated Kobe and its vicinity. This eloquently showed that both leaders shared no urgent sense of crisis and drew strong public criticism and anger.

The accusing finger has been pointed, mainly, at Mr. Murayama and other government officials involved. Indeed, they should have tried, at least, to address in the Diet the many questions and

doubts that remain unanswered for the majority of the populace. Why was every relief effort so slow to start?

Why did this country appear reluctant to promptly accept relief aid from foreign countries? And, what is the first thing to do in the wake of such a catastrophe? These are only a few of a mountain of the urgent questions that should have been addressed.

At every level of administration and at every stage of the unfolding crisis, Mr. Murayama and all other responsible politicians and officials should have tried to deal with these issues, especially for the benefit of the quake victims and other concerned people. We hear too many complaints that for several days after the quake, officials at both high and low levels failed to comply with inquiries or requests from citizens because they had received no "instructions from above." This Japanese mindset inherent in the vertically divided bureaucracy has been hampering the progress of relief efforts as badly as the politicians' insensitivity.

The Hanshin Great Earthquake has forced all Japanese to recognize that this country does not have a reliable crisis management system. It came as a total surprise that the Prime Minister's Official Residence not only received initial information about the temblor from TV broadcasts but also had to rely on such sources in its initial effort to gauge the scale of the disaster. Unbelievably, the central government was unable to obtain adequate information directly from the Hyogo Prefectural Government because the ordinary telephone circuits had been disrupted.

Now the urgent task for this nation is to create a national crisis management system by integrating related functions under a single command. During the 38-year-long rule of the Liberal Democratic Party, efforts were consistently exerted to build up capabilities to cope with an emergency on the defense and security front. But little attention was paid to the need to establish a national system to deal with a crisis like the current one, which has killed more than 5,000 people and has inflicted suffering on tens of thousands of other citizens.

In this sense, the negative legacy of our past politics is greatly responsible for the present sorry state of affairs. A revolution in thinking and a drastic revamping of the administrative organization will be demanded for the establishment of such a crisis management system. But this country must meet the demand.

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