



Two-wheeled transport KIMIO IDA

The Road to Kobe

Reporter Akemi Nakamura witnesses chaos and despair as she makes her way from Osaka to Kobe on Day 1

By AKEMI NAKAMURA

I sensed a strange tranquillity in the usually bustling Yodoyabashi business district of Osaka when I got out of a crowded Keihan train on the morning of Jan. 17.

Show windows at a Mizuno sporting goods store were broken, and the debris of building walls was scattered about the streets. A few office workers were heading for their offices by foot as most train and subway systems here were disrupted.

Earlier that morning, I awoke with the first bang of the 20-second-long fierce temblor at my apartment in Neyagawa, about 25 km from Osaka toward Kyoto. I reacted to the thought that my life would be in danger, but immediately realized that I was safe with only minor damage to my apartment — a mirror fallen from a wall and a

ceramic decoration on the television set having crashed onto the floor.

It was much later that I realized the temblor had slipped what used to be the posh Hanshin area back into a cityscape reminiscent of 1945.

Stepping into The Japan Times Osaka Bureau on the third floor of a business complex near the Tosabori 1-Chome intersection in Nishi Ward, I found all the desk drawers open with newspapers and news releases scattered about the floor.

After calling my editor at our Tokyo head office shortly before 10 a.m., I was on my way to Kobe in a taxi.

Traffic on National Route 2 linking Osaka with Kobe was completely backed up. It took nearly three hours to travel from Osaka to the other side of the Muko River on

the border of Amagasaki and Nishinomiyah, both in Hyogo Prefecture. The trip usually takes no more than one hour.

It was already 1 p.m. when I decided to get out of the taxi at Kamikoshien, not far from the river.

Along the national highway, I saw a landscape I had never seen before — flattened wooden houses, demolished buildings, tilting utility poles with jammed wires, derailed trains, smoke and cracked pavement with liquefied gray soil emerging from the cracks. Burning smells also filled the air.

Crossing a damaged bridge over the Shukugawa River, I met an old man wrapped in a blanket who was warming himself up with a stove. Looking at about 10 collapsed houses, I asked him if he