

## national

# Tohoku students share tales of disasters on global stage

Sayuri Daimon  
STAFF WRITER  
Dalian, China

Global leaders who gathered last week in Dalian, China, for the Annual Meeting of the New Champions, Asia's premier global business forum, had a rare chance to hear Japanese high school and university students' firsthand experiences of the March disasters.

Seven students from disaster-hit areas in the Tohoku region were invited to the three-day "Summer Davos" organized by the World Economic Forum, where they recounted their stories. The forum is named after the WEF's more famous conference held in Davos, Switzerland, every January.

In addition to giving the students an opportunity to share their experiences of the catastrophe with global political and business leaders, attending the summit profoundly influenced them and helped define what roles they wish to play in the future.

"Because of attending (the Summer Davos), I now strongly feel that I want to go abroad to study urban planning. I also want to convey what I learned from the March 11 disasters to people outside Japan," Junpei Shida, a freshman in Iwate Uni-

versity's engineering department, said in an interview with The Japan Times.

"I want to rebuild my hometown in such a way that no one will need to fear possible tsunami in the future," said Shida, who is from the small area of Akasaki in Ofunato, Iwate Prefecture.

He said after March 11, Akasaki's 90 residents had to shelter for nearly 20 days in the only two houses the tsunami spared, in extremely difficult conditions with 45 people crammed into

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SAYAKA SUGAWARA, A STUDENT AT SENDAI IKUEI GAKUEN HIGH SCHOOL

each house.

"But I felt the disaster fostered a sense of solidarity in Japan. People conducted themselves well, and followed the rules and regulations. No one acted in a self-centered manner," Shida said.

Eisuke Kato, a senior at Torio High School in Kesennuma, Miyagi Prefecture, who barely survived the fire that destroyed a huge part of the city on March 11, has a similar dream.

"I was interested in design

even before the quake. But because of my hopes of helping rebuild Kesennuma, I want to major in architecture when I go to university," Kato said.

The Dalian meeting, which kicked off Sept. 14 with a speech by Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, attracted about 1,500 political, corporate and academic leaders, and the students admitted they were nervous to address such globally prominent figures.

Shida said he felt the audience at a special session titled

"Tohoku to the World: Survivors' Experience," was deeply moved by the students' speeches, and noticed that some participants even shed tears.

Sayaka Sugawara, who is in her first year at Sendai Ikuei Gakuen High School in Sendai, also spoke at the session.

"People may have seen images of tsunami and debris on the news, but they have no way of knowing how the victims are feeling unless we talk to them. I wanted to let people outside

Japan know that it was much harder for us to survive the crisis than they think," Sugawara said in an interview after her speech.

The tsunami hit her neighborhood in Ishinomaki, Miyagi Prefecture, just after she returned from her junior high school's graduation ceremony. Her mother and grandmother died that day, and her great-grandmother remains unaccounted for.

She herself was swept away in the torrent of water but somehow managed to locate her mother, who had broken her leg and was trapped under debris, with some pieces of wood sticking into her body. She tried to rescue her but quickly realized that the wreckage was too heavy for her to lift, and that if she stayed to try and help her mother, she would also probably die.

"I chose to live. It was a heart-wrenching decision and I cannot help crying whenever I remember that moment. ... When I left my mother, I kept saying, 'Thank you, I love you,'" she said in her speech.

The following months were so difficult that she even felt like killing herself, she said. But she now says that after experiencing such great hardships she learned many things. She also stressed how grateful she is to her grandfather, aunt and friends who have supported her.



World stage: Klaus Schwab, founder and executive chairman of the World Economic Forum, introduces Japanese students from disaster-hit areas at a reception hosted by the Japanese government at the "Summer Davos" in Dalian, China, on Sept. 14. PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE

"Because I went through many things and am now living on my own, I feel I have become much stronger," she said.

The life of Mamoru Okoshi, a second-year student at Fukushima University, was most affected by the crisis at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant accident. He said the disaster taught him that people have to think for themselves and be brave enough to act on their decisions.

Okoshi, a resident of the city of Fukushima at the time of the quake-tsunami disaster, said he received an email from one of his professors on March 13 ad-

vising students to evacuate the city, as the accident at the nuclear plant could be much worse than described in media reports or government information.

Two days later, he received another email from the professor strongly urging them to leave the area, and he immediately fled the city with his friends, driving to his parents' house in Niigata Prefecture.

"The government was saying the nuclear reactors were safe, but in reality, the fuel rods in some of them suffered meltdowns. Unless you use your own head to make a decision and act

accordingly, you will never understand anything," he said.

The trip was organized by the Tokyo-based Global Fund for Education Assistance, and several executives of domestic companies who regularly attend the annual WEF conferences in Davos and China acted as guides for the students. They included Oisix Inc. founder and CEO Kohy Takashima, and Daisuke Iwase, executive vice president of Lifenet Insurance Co.

The group selected the seven students based on essays they submitted and phone interviews with them.

Minami Tsubouchi, the group's executive director who was in charge of organizing the trip, said the visit was not just charity but was intended to enable survivors of the Great East Japan Earthquake to grow stronger.

"The fact that the students were given an opportunity to speak on such a huge (global) stage has changed them enormously in a very short period of time," she said. "I believe great leaders can emerge from among those who experience great hardships. I hope this kind of experience will help the students to fly high in the future."