

Recovery in KUMAMOTO



Kumamoto Prefecture Governor Ikuo Kabashima with the prefectural mascot, Kumamon
(This interview was held on September 28)

ON April 14 and 16 2016 two major earthquakes caused many fatalities, injuries and widespread damage in the Kyushu island prefectures of Kumamoto and Oita. We asked Kumamoto Governor Ikuo Kabashima about the situation in his prefecture today.

Governor, about six months have now passed since the Kumamoto earthquakes. What is the status of recovery in Kumamoto Prefecture?

After the quake, over 180,000 people, about 10% of Kumamoto's population, took shelter at evacuation sites. We completed over 90% of the construction of temporary housing by the end of September and have almost entirely secured housing for those who lost their homes. We are now going through the reconstruction and recovery phase.

We're also taking a variety of steps to support economic recovery. For instance, the national and Kumamoto governments are helping to cover three-quarters of the expenses incurred by small and medium sized enterprises in rebuilding facilities that were damaged by the quake. Financial institutions are also providing low-interest loans and extending repayment deadlines for outstanding loans. This support is paying off. Very few companies have filed for bankruptcy owing to the quake, and the local economy is on the mend.

What is the status of tourism in Kumamoto now?

Thanks to the aid system called "Kyushu Fukko-wari" (Discounts for Kyushu reconstruction) established by the government after the quake to support the tourist industry in Kyushu, people can travel in Kumamoto Prefecture much more cheaply than before. This has resulted in a substantial rebound in the number of travelers. I think traveling in

Kumamoto is a kind of volunteer activity, so we hope to welcome more and more visitors to the prefecture going forward.

As for the restoration of Kumamoto Castle, which is the symbol of our prefecture and a very popular tourist destination, we will work hard in cooperation with Kumamoto City and the national government. We aim for restoration of the donjon and the surrounding parks to be completed as soon as possible in preparation for the Rugby World Cup and the World Women's Handball Championship in Kumamoto in 2019. Restoration of the stone walls and the tower of the castle is scheduled to take about twenty years. We plan to make it possible for the general public to see the ongoing restoration process.

How did the people of Kumamoto Prefecture find encouragement amid the dreadful circumstances following the quake?

Kumamoto has received much heart-warming support and many encouraging words from people of all ages. Many volunteers also came to assist in the recovery. Moreover, we have received support from people in Taiwan, Korea and elsewhere overseas. The people of our prefecture, myself included, were touched by this support and are deeply grateful.

Through the quake, the people in Kumamoto have learned the importance of daily living and the development of strong bonds among people with a shared experience of the disaster, and of not allowing our feelings of gratitude to be forgotten. I sense that people have also become stronger psychologically as a result.

The Recovery and Reconstruction Plan worked out in August uses the phrase “build back better.” Could you explain what this means?

“Build back better” means rebuilding conditions better rather than simply returning to the status quo before the quake. One effort in this regard

is to further increase our exchanges with foreign countries. In order to attract foreigners visiting Japan to the nation's national parks, for example, the Ministry of the Environment in July designated Aso Kuju National Park as one of eight national parks on which to concentrate efforts. By further improving park facilities and access, we hope to enable many more foreign visitors to enjoy the majestic natural beauty of the Aso caldera. Preparations will be made to increase the number of international flights to Kumamoto Airport and to increase calls by large passenger ships to Yatsushiro Port with a view to making it a gateway to Asia in Kyushu.

It also seems that Kumamoto Prefecture's popular mascot character Kumamon has been appearing more widely since the quake.

Yes, Kumamon is loved not just by the people of Kumamoto Prefecture but by many Japanese. The major reason we've succeeded in making Kumamon so popular across the country is its simple design. Another endearing quality of the character is that Kumamon doesn't talk but simply communicates feelings with gestures. We're allowing the Kumamon image to be used royalty free for Kumamoto publicity. Sales of various Kumamon products amounted to over 100 billion yen last year and are expected to exceed that figure this year. Through the sale of such products, Kumamon has become well known throughout the country, which means very substantial benefits for our prefecture. We're putting a lot of effort into publicity activities abroad to further increase the value of Kumamon. Kumamon is highly popular in Taiwan, Hong Kong, the Chinese mainland and Thailand. I hope that Kumamon will play a role in promoting the vibrancy and charm of Kumamoto both at home and abroad as a symbol of recovery from the earthquake. 

Inverview by OSAMU SAWAJI
