Can Transparency Trump a Tsunami?

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As Japan addresses the triple catastrophe of earthquake, tsunami, and radioactivity, the world stands transfixed. Given the massive loss of life, property, and prosperity, it's easy to think that Japan may be facing an emergency on the order of Chernobyl. Whatever transpires, it's worth remembering that this is not another Chernobyl for three reasons:

Immediacy. In 1989, I apparently became the first Western journalist to visit Chernobyl. I was taken there by several members of the emergency response team that had gone in three years earlier after the explosion at Reactor Number 4. That three-year hiatus tells you something: Not only did the Soviets stonewall the world in the days after April 26, 1986, refusing to warn the world until radioactivity began drifting into neighboring countries, but three years later they were still haggling over the blame and uncomfortable with journalists wanting the back story.

The Japanese government, by contrast, sprang into action immediately. Smarting from accusations of inaction during the 1995 Kobe earthquake and criticized for lack of transparency about problems at nuclear power plants, officials responded with everything from evacuation orders to iodine pills — and with news releases. Three years from now, the causes of the meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant will be well-documented history, not a surprise.

Integrity. At Chernobyl, the back story, as I began piecing it together for my newspaper at the time, the **Christian Science Monitor**, was not about a mechanical failure or an innocent human error. It was instead about a moral collapse. It began with a couple of plant operators in the control room that night, trying to perform what the authorities described as an unauthorized experiment. Disabling alarm systems and padlocking values into open positions, they forced the system to shut down. By some (perhaps apocryphal) accounts, they held pistols to workers' heads to compel them to do their bidding. Result: the largest industrial accident in the history of the world. It put hundreds of square miles of prime Ukrainian farmland out of use for decades and caused hundreds of thousands of deaths.

Japan's story is not at all similar. Fukushima Daiichi is not the story of a willful ethical collapse, but the result of an earthquake so massive that over the weekend it was upgraded from 8.8 to 9.0 on the Richter scale, effectively doubling its power. Were Japan's engineers unethical in failing to prepare for such a catastrophe? To argue that case, you first would have to endow them with superhuman predictive powers and then expect that taxpayers would approve of preparations for an event unparalleled by anything in their ancient nation's recorded history.

Transparency. Chernobyl happened to a people whose rulers deliberately had kept them in the dark — and themselves in denial. When the energy minister in Moscow was awakened in the middle of the night with the news that the reactor had suffered an explosion and a meltdown,

his response, I'm told, was that "this can't have happened because it cannot happen!" Only when he took a helicopter over the smoking, steaming core did he admit that it had happened.

Japan, by contrast, hasn't been in denial. It has invested heavily in alarm systems and disaster drills. Its energetic population, accustomed to self-discipline and rule-following, knew what to do when the tsunami sirens sounded. Not all of them survived, but by all accounts their training greatly reduced the loss of life.

And that speaks to the most important distinction between Chernobyl and Japan. Chernobyl is a state of mind. It arises where heavy authoritarianism breeds petty autocrats, where the value of human life is steeply discounted, and where a grinding economy breeds bribery and fraud. The Soviet Union was relentlessly corrupt. According to the 2010 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) from Transparency International, that blight still plagues Russia. The CPI gives Russia a score of 2.1 out of 10, ranking it at 154 out of 178 nations as among the most corrupt. Japan's 7.8 score, in contrast, puts it at 17th — even cleaner than the United States.

And that's the real point: Unlike Turkey and China, where buildings crumbled during less powerful shocks, Japan isn't awash with bribable building inspectors and contractors who don't build to code. Unlike Haiti, Japan's legal and economic systems have allowed millions to work in quake-proofed buildings and live in safe homes. Like Chile, Japan's self-confidence lets it accept aid from other nations, whether for a mine collapse or a tsunami. And when aid arrives, most of it reaches its target rather than landing in the bank accounts of kleptocrats.

In the end, Japan will master this 9.0 earthquake because of its 7.8 transparency. In the midst of unspeakable tragedy, that's worth celebrating.