

To err on the side of caution

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This autumn, several typhoons reached Japan. Typhoon Vongfong, the 19th typhoon this year, hit almost all parts of Japan during the second weekend of October and on the following Monday, a national holiday.

Several local governments or other responsible organizations issued formal advisories for evacuation in an attempt to reduce damage (*"gensai"* in Japanese). Among these, the decision by West Japan Railway, made public nationwide on Oct. 12, must have surprised a considerably large number of people. The cancelation of all train services in the Osaka, Kyoto and Kobe areas from 4 p.m. the following day was of an unprecedented large scale and unusually early. We can safely judge it as timely if we take into consideration the possible usefulness of the announcement in terms of avoiding damage to many expected passengers.

But the next day it turned out that the rainstorm was not as "disastrous" as expected even though the typhoon passed through those areas. Other private railways operated trains as usual to fulfill the task of routine transportation.

A young man interviewed by a broadcast station complained that JR West's decision to stop all the train services was excessive and caused inconvenience. His complaint is understandable if he was to go on a holiday, and he deserves to be praised for his loyalty to his employer if he was to go to work.

Nonetheless, the preventive action taken by JR West should be termed as apt and the man's reaction should also

be regarded as off the mark. We all know that disasters or accidents suddenly occur and break our plans all at once. Usually we unconsciously bet on the side that such a thing will not happen and that tomorrow will be just like today or yesterday, and stick to this habitual thinking.

This thinking is responsible for the man's expression of "inconvenience." We live with the idea that public transport companies are supposed to serve us and that we have the full right to enjoy their services as long as we are prepared to pay for them. This stance contradicts the idea of reducing damage from natural disasters as much as possible and may do more harm than good in diffusing the idea of damage reduction.

The concept becomes more important if we realize that we cannot escape the fierceness of nature that comes in the form of typhoons, rainstorms and floods, landslides, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions one after another — not only in Japan but also anywhere else.

Certainly damage includes economic loss calculated as cost. Needless to say, unrealized sales would be less important than the loss of precious human lives. But to emphasize again, we usually assume that disasters happen only rarely and we discount their cost with the probability of occurrence.

Hence the cost calculation is done as risk management. But the concepts of risk and probability are actually useless if we realize the sheer uncertainty with which nature attacks us with catastrophic effects. It is beyond any presumption of risk management. Besides, damage — and benefits in the opposite direction — to the general public are much more difficult to calculate than the cost to individual economic actors.

Looking back in history, there have

been repeated experiences of flood damage and damage from other natural disasters in the world. In the modern world, it has been the engineers and bureaucrats of the nation states hit by disasters who have played an important role in determining the scale of damage.

Still the problem of gauging damage remains. In a cursory investigation, I encountered a cruel view concerning French engineers in bureaucracy. The material I picked said, "Engineers were warned not to take on faith the damage claims of those actually flooded, since they were prone to exaggerate."

Actually this view is often seen among other people involved in handling damage claims. But how is it justified to exclude the reports and opinions of those who have directly suffered from disasters in assessing the damage to them?

Grief over damage cannot be categorized into a scale of graded levels; hence there is no exaggeration in the expression of grief by victims of disasters. It is not fair to underestimate compensation for damage in the name of general interest. This is an area where the approach for ordinary cost calculation should not be employed.

The idea of damage reduction characterized by making necessary preparations much in advance has been devised to overcome the limit of ordinary cost calculation and is essential to avoid damage as much as possible.

This approach should not be discarded even if it turns out that some forecast disasters did not occur. Such a failure in a forecast is not something to reproach but a relief for which to be thankful.

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