

Japan's bishops defy nuclear threat and gather in devastated zone



JAPANESE bishops met in Sendai, the diocese most affected by last Friday's earthquake and tsunami, on Wednesday this week, as thousands fled the area in fear of nuclear explosions from the nearby Fukushima Daiichi plant.

Following the 9.0 magnitude earthquake whose epicentre was 50 miles off the north-east coast of Honshu, Japan's biggest island, and which triggered a tsunami that laid waste 200 miles of coastline and obliterated many towns, news of the condition of the nuclear reactors became ever more disturbing.

People were initially evacuated from areas close to the plant, and those further away told to stay indoors, but as the dangers of a meltdown at one or more of the four reactors increased and radiation levels rose, many lost confidence in the information that was coming from the Government. Fears grew in Tokyo too, 150 miles to the south, that northerly winds would carry the radiation to the capital. Ahead of the meeting, Bishop Martin Tetsuo Hiraga of Sendai told the Fides news agency that hope is "the gift that Christians can make to the country at this time of suffering. The situation is very difficult. We are not yet able to comprehend the enormity of the disaster".

"Today the dominant feeling is fear," said Fr Daisuke Narui, director of Caritas Japan, who also attended the meeting. "The biggest concern is that of the nuclear power plant in Fukushima. It is a ghost from Japanese history coming back to haunt us." "We are terrified," Bishop Hiraga told Vatican Radio. "We only have the government announcements, we have no other source of information. We don't even know what has happened to our parishes in the towns and villages along the coast. We have no way of contacting them. I can only hope that the people of my diocese can stand together and be strong enough to overcome this disaster."

At Wednesday's meeting, the bishops and Caritas staff agreed to open an emergency centre in Sendai to arrange and coordinate humanitarian operations, under the supervision of Caritas Japan. They said other initiatives would be announced. "From now, we roll our sleeves up. The people are waiting for our help," Fr Narui said. Earlier, he said he was particularly encouraged by the enthusiasm of young people offering to help the displaced. "Young people are coming to Caritas from all the dioceses to offer their availability as volunteers," he told Fides. "This is an important sign that gives us hope for the future."

Bishop Hiraga said that "in the worst-affected areas the main problem is the lack of food and fuel. As there is no fuel, people cannot move. And they are left feeling powerless in the face of this tragedy."

Pope Benedict XVI encouraged relief efforts in Japan, saying he was praying for victims and their families and everyone suffering from this "tremendous event".

"I want to renew my spiritual closeness to the dear people of that country, who are facing the consequences of such a calamity with dignity and courage," the Pope said on Sunday after praying the Angelus with a crowd of visitors gathered in St Peter's Square. "I encourage all those who, with commendable swiftness, are dedicating themselves to bringing help." Bishop Hiraga said the Pope's message instilled "courage and hope" and they wanted to do the same for others. "What makes human persons differ from other creatures is our capacity to make choices.

Love and compassion are choices. God is not interested in the rote response of robots. He invites the loving response of sons and daughters, towards him and one another," he said.

The Diocese of Sendai has a population of 10,944 baptised Catholics, representing 0.15 per cent of its population of 7.2 million.

James Roberts