

The Kumamoto earthquakes and the beginning of KEEP

The Kumamoto earthquakes struck without warning in April 2016, throwing Kumamoto City into chaos and leaving international students like myself with many fears and no clear idea of what to do. The foreshock struck at 21:25 on April 14th. I was already at home at the time, sitting at my desk and using my computer. I noticed my monitor start shaking, and about a second later realised that it was an earthquake.

What should I do? I had never received any disaster training, but I knew that I should at least protect my head. I went under my computer desk, but then realised that it was made of glass, and if it broke it could cut my face badly. I quickly moved away and tried to go under my bed, but my 189 cm frame would not fit. In the end, I lifted my mattress onto my shoulder and positioned it in a way that I hoped would protect me if something fell from above. I remember looking at the corner of my room and thinking to myself that if I saw a crack appear, I might only have a second left before the building collapsed.

Luckily, the building did not collapse. After the shaking stopped, I stood up in shock, unable to move for a moment. Eventually I heard the sound of doors opening and people leaving their apartments. I had no idea what else to do, so I decided to follow them. I went to a nearby car park, where around fifteen people had gathered. I stayed there for about two hours. Eventually I noticed that some Japanese residents were returning to their apartments, and I thought to myself that if they were going back inside, it must be safe. I had no access to accurate disaster information, so all I could do was guess what the correct action was.

The next day, April 15th, I went to Kumamoto University and spoke with friends. My Japanese friends told me that the earthquake had been unexpected, but that there probably would not be a stronger one. They said there might be aftershocks, but nothing like what we had experienced the night before. I felt some relief, but I was still unsure what to think. Since coming to Kumamoto in 2014, many people had told me that Kumamoto did not have earthquakes, so it was difficult to understand what was happening.

That night I went to bed around midnight, very tired from lack of sleep the previous night. I thought that I would go to the university the next day and catch up on my studies. I had no idea that we would get another large earthquake so soon.

At 01:25 on Saturday, April 16th, the main shock struck. I woke up suddenly to the sound of the earth tearing itself apart and my apartment shaking violently. The shaking was far stronger than the night before, and there was no light. I had no sense of time, only a feeling of incomprehension.

My next-door neighbour, a Japanese student at Kumamoto University, had been awake at the time and managed to get outside. He kindly thought that I might need help, and knocked on my window while shining the flashlight on his smartphone into the room and calling out, "Daijoubu? Daijoubu?" This was the first moment I clearly remember thinking something. I did not know who was there, but I thought it must be the police or the fire brigade trying to pull me out before the building collapsed. I jumped out of bed and ran to the door, going outside without even getting properly dressed. My neighbour grabbed me and told me, in Japanese, that it was OK and that we still had time. He told me to go back inside and put

some clothes on, and then we went together to the same car park where I had gone the night before.

We spoke in Japanese, but my Japanese ability at the time was limited. He kept asking me questions to make sure I was alright, and I had to ask him to repeat himself several times, after which he would say the same thing in simpler Japanese. After about fifteen or twenty minutes, I believe he used the word *hinan* (evacuation), but I did not understand what it meant. Instead, he asked me in simpler Japanese if we should go to Kumamoto University together. I agreed, but I did not really understand why we were going there. When we arrived, I saw that many people had gathered on campus, and I found some other international student friends. I thanked my neighbour, who made sure I was safe before he left.

I spent the rest of the night outside, because the Kurokami campus gymnasium was already full by the time I arrived. I felt safer than before, but I still did not know when I would be able to get food, or whether another large earthquake might strike. I also saw rumours online about bridges collapsing and another big earthquake coming soon. I did not know where to get reliable information, and this made me feel very anxious about what would happen next.

On the evening of April 16, I left Kumamoto together with my Bulgarian friends and stayed in Miyazaki for about a week. Even after reaching a safe place, I was very worried about my friends who remained in Kumamoto. Later, I heard from a neighbour that my apartment was safe and that food had slowly started to appear again in the shops, so I decided to return to Kumamoto. At the time, I did not know what I should do, and it never even occurred to me to take photographs right after the earthquake or of the condition of my own apartment. After returning to Kumamoto, I could not believe the damage I was seeing with my own eyes, and I only remember taking photographs of damaged buildings.

After returning to Kumamoto, I spoke with many friends about what had happened. Everyone had stories of fear and uncertainty, but when I spoke with international students, I realised that many of them had experiences very similar to mine. Many had not known what to do, had not understood the information around them, and had felt isolated during the disaster. It felt good to share these experiences with each other. It led to a sense of relief, because although we had been separated at the time, we were all safe and we had all felt the same uncertainties.

This became the starting point of what later developed into KEEP. The original idea to create a project came from Professor Shiya Ueno, who was teaching public policy at Kumamoto University at the time. All of the members who later formed KEEP were students in his class, and he suggested that we should make a project to record people's experiences of the earthquake for those who had not experienced it themselves. At the time, none of us realised how important this would become, but that small idea became the beginning of KEEP.

Although I have now been involved in KEEP activities for ten years, the original spark came from Professor Ueno's suggestion, and I am still grateful for his support during the early years. Thanks to that initial idea, our experiences were first shared within Kumamoto, then across Japan, and now, from time to time, with people around the world, helping people understand the issues people face during natural disasters and how they can better prepare.