

## An Agreement of Mutual Support That Saved Lives

### Heartfelt Support from Our Friendship Town Shonai, Yamagata Prefecture



▲ Emergency food relief from the people of Shonai (Utatsu district)

Photo courtesy of Shonai Town, Yamagata Prefecture

In Minamisanriku, where all of the resources that support life, including water, food, and electricity, had been cut off, it was municipalities located far away from the epicenter of the earthquake that moved quickly to mobilize relief operations.

On the morning of March 13, 2011, an advance relief team from Shonai, Yamagata Prefecture, made its way to Minamisanriku with 50 blankets, 50 undershirts, and water. The town of Shonai had a friendship town status with Minamisanriku and had signed an agreement of mutual assistance in the event of disasters. When the team arrived in Minamisanriku, it found a town changed beyond recognition. The advance team met with the mayor and deputy mayor and learned what supplies the town required. Full-scale support began the following day, on March 14.

Every day, two 4-ton trucks were loaded with water, onigiri rice balls, and rinse-free rice and made a trip that took over 5 hours one way. Each day, until the end of March 2011, 8,000 onigiri rice balls and 1 ton of water were delivered across this distance. The trucks navigated mountain passes whose surfaces sometimes freeze over in an effort to deliver a total of 100,000 onigiri.

When the first stage of these emergency support activities was completed, a group called the Minamisanriku Reconstruction Assistance Disaster Volunteers was jointly formed by the town of Shonai and the Shonai Social Welfare Council. Its volunteers carried out relief operations, traveling to and from Minamisanriku by bus, in a gesture of emotional support. Exchanges that brought the two communities closer together, such as the invitation of children and other Minamisanriku residents to Shonai, continued in the wake of the disaster.

Exchanges between elementary schools in the former towns of Utatsu and Tachikawa had already taken place since earlier times. With such a foundation of exchange among townsfolk from both areas already in place, the agreement of mutual support with Shonai was able to function in a timely and precise manner when the 2011 disaster occurred.