

Food and Water for 10,000 Evacuees: Disaster Countermeasures Headquarters

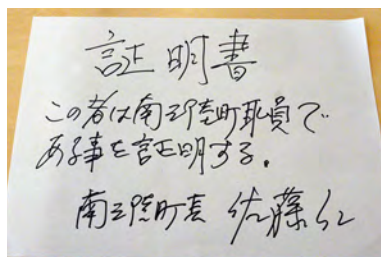


▲ Minamisanriku Town Mayor Sato Jin at a press conference. Press conferences were held at a fixed time every day. The power of the media attracted many people to Minamisanriku.

The Disaster Countermeasures Headquarters went into action the day after the earthquake struck. Mayor Sato Jin, who should have been heading the Disaster Countermeasures Headquarters, survived a night of subzero temperatures, soaking wet, on the roof of the Disaster Emergency Center, which had been inundated by the tsunami. He was with nine other staff, all of whom barely survived. The next morning, the 10 people mustered the strength to escape from the building on their own, despite weaknesses and injuries. With staggering footsteps, they made their way to an elementary school on high ground. Before even catching his breath, the mayor moved to the gymnasium, which was also on high ground, where he set up the Disaster Countermeasures Headquarters in a small office. Physically and mentally exhausted, the only thing that motivated him to action was his strong desire to protect the townspeople's lives.

The Disaster Countermeasures Headquarters was launched in a situation where neither telephones nor the Internet were working, where lifelines were cut off, and where none of the people, information, or things required in the crisis were available. The first meeting was attended by only three people: the mayor and two regional firefighters. The mayor's first instructions were to gather information and distribute onigiri rice balls to townsfolk. At night, he worked by the light of a hand-cranked LED light as he took notes on the situation. Falling asleep on the floor without blankets, the men shivered in the freezing temperatures. Among them were some who had lost their homes and families to the tsunami.

From the following day onward, a succession of rescuers hurried to Minamisanriku. Information gathering was not going smoothly, and the situation was chaotic. Reporters also arrived. The mayor addressed them saying, "The people of Minamisanriku need food and water." He then wrote an IOU by hand on a piece of photocopy paper (see photo on the bottom left) and handed it to a town hall staff member who was able to leave the site. It was a command to procure food and daily essentials—to be paid for later—in towns farther inland.



▲ Reproduction of the official handwritten IOU handed by the mayor to a member of town hall staff. Shopkeepers in inland areas sold goods to Minamisanriku on credit, with priority given to food and medical supplies.