

Country: Japan
Agency: Japanese Government Headquarters for IDNDR
 (Secretariat: National Land Agency, Disaster Prevention Bureau)

A) Disaster-reduction Measures in Japan

1. Description of disasters

Every year, Japan is subject to many natural disasters, including earthquakes, typhoons, torrential rains, heavy snowfall, land slides, and volcanic eruptions. The Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake of January 17, 1995 was the worst disaster in the postwar period, with more than 5,500 victims. It was the first earthquake to hit directly under a large city with a high concentration of socioeconomic functions and services, and it forced a renewed recognition of the threat that natural disaster poses.

The number of those dead or missing from natural disasters in Japan has been in decline since around 1960; in recent years it has been in the 100-200 range, with a slow overall downwards trend. In 1995, however, we recorded more than 5,000 victims, the first time the total has gone over a thousand in thirty-five years. Moreover, as urbanization progresses, there tends to be an increase in the total damage done should disaster strike. The bill for the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake is estimated at about JYE (Japanese Yen) 9.6 trillion.

2. Disaster-reduction laws, organizations and plans

(1) Legal framework

The Disaster Countermeasures Basic Act came about in 1961 as a result of a typhoon that hit the Bay of Ise in 1959 and caused more than 5,000 deaths. The act aimed to remedy inadequacies in the old disaster-reduction framework and promote comprehensive, systematic efforts by the government to reduce disasters. It had five main thrusts: i) to clarify disaster-reduction responsibilities and implement programs to prepare for, provide emergency response to, and recover from disaster; ii) to promote comprehensive administrative efforts towards disaster-reduction; iii) to promote systematic administrative efforts towards disaster-reduction; iv) to provide public financial resources to cope with disaster; and v) to set out procedures for proclaiming disaster emergencies.

There are other laws besides the very general Disaster Countermeasures Basic Act that impinge on disaster-reduction efforts, including the flood control laws, the Disaster Relief Law, and the Large-scale Earthquake Countermeasures Act.

(2) Disaster-reduction organizations

Overseeing efforts at the national level is the Central Disaster Prevention Council, which is chaired by the prime minister. The meeting is responsible for formulating the Basic Plan for Disaster Prevention that serves as the foundation for disaster-reduction programs. It also discusses other important issues related to disaster-reduction. There are, in addition, twenty-nine designated government agencies and thirty-eight designated public institutions (including Nippon Telegraph and Telephone and all of the electric power companies) that are charged with formulating Operational Plans for Disaster Prevention and implementing disaster-reduction programs.