

Transfixed by the disaster in Japan

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By DAVID OLSON
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Lisa Villa has been getting up early and staying up late watching the television news since the earthquake and tsunami struck Japan on March 11.

"I don't know why I'm drawn to it," said the 42-year-old Riverside woman. "I just feel so saddened. The devastation is so horrible."

Across the Inland area, people have been transfixed by the images of destruction on their televisions and computer screens and in their newspapers. They're posting messages of concern on their Facebook pages, talking about the disaster with friends and family and praying for victims. Like Villa, some are donating to relief efforts.



AP photo

Firetrucks drive through tsunami-stricken Onagawa.
Experts say disasters in Japan are viewed differently
than, say, Haiti.

Experts say it's common for people to be intensely interested in disasters, because of the dramatic pictures and because it's human nature to be compassionate.

The tragedy in Japan may especially resonate with Americans.

Derek Burrill, an associate professor of media and cultural studies at UC Riverside, said Californians are more likely to be taken aback by the images from Japan than from pictures of destruction in the developing world.

People often are not surprised by scenes of chaos following a disaster in a country such as Haiti, because they view those nations as perpetually befallen by tragedy, with desperately poor people they cannot identify with and governments they believe wouldn't be expected to respond well to an earthquake, he said.

But Japan is different, Burrill said. It is a wealthy country with a reputation for efficiency and technological know-how, with a free-market economy similar to the one in the United States. When people see even Japan struggling to help its residents and fearful of nuclear catastrophe, they are shocked and more likely to be emotionally impacted.

'LOOKS LIKE CALIFORNIA'

Russell Walling, 93, of Riverside, said he is struck by "how much it looks like California.

When you see the water washing away the houses and buildings, those buildings look like the buildings here. You can relate it to your own life."

Vivian Nuñez, 49, said the frantic attempts by the Japanese to prevent a nuclear disaster hit home. She works for Riverside County but lives in San Clemente about 10 miles from the San Onofre nuclear plant.

"It comes down to a possibility we could have a disaster that is pretty similar," she said.

Nuñez isn't panicking. She knows there are sophisticated precautions in place at the plant, and she has always been aware of the risks. She periodically hears warning-siren tests, and each year she signs a consent form giving her son's school permission to give him potassium iodine pills in the event of a release of radiation.

But, she said of the Japanese nuclear stations, "You look at it and do think, 'What if it happened to you?'"

Toby Miller, a professor of media and cultural studies at UC Riverside, said the difficulty in providing adequate food, water and shelter to all of the Japanese victims reminds him of Katrina, when the world was stunned that people were left to fend for themselves so long.

The nature of disaster lends itself to intense media coverage, Miller said. A cholera epidemic, for example, may kill more people, but it doesn't have the immediacy or the dramatic images of massive tsunami waves washing away homes and cars and the rubble left in their wake.

Americans aren't the only ones closely monitoring events in Japan, Miller said. The British Broadcasting Corporation, for example, has 46 journalists in Japan, indicating the interest there and around the world, he said.

"This is one of those moments when you feel that you're part of an international community," he said.

QUICK COMMUNICATIONS

Facebook and other social media sites have allowed users to quickly communicate their sentiments to many people at once. The Rev. Devo Kritzinger, youth pastor at La Sierra University Seventh-day Adventist Church in Riverside, said he knew the high school students in his Sabbath school class were paying close attention to Japan through Facebook posts such as "Praying for Japan."

Kritzinger said he canceled his lesson plan on Scripture for the March 12 class so he could devote the hour to talking about Japan.

Robert Cramer, a professor of psychology at Cal State San Bernardino, said natural disasters often elicit feelings of sorrow and compassion, even when people do not identify with the victims.

"I think people believe, 'These individuals in no way brought this upon themselves. This could in some way happen to anyone,'" he said. "People typically have compassion for other individuals when they experience an event out of their control: It could happen to us, and we'd want compassion shown in our direction."

Crystal Baldwin, 52, of Corona, said the stories of people losing their lives and homes, and of those surviving amid destruction, are compelling.

"I care, naturally," Baldwin said. "People's lives are affected, devastated. There are a lot of people without families, without homes. We're human."

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A Press-Enterprise special section on the large earthquake near Sendai, Japan.

Special Section: Japan Quake
