

Japan tsunami: country marks five years since tragedy struck

Japan pauses to remember nearly 19,000 victims of earthquake, tsunami and nuclear crisis during slow journey to recovery



Archive footage: The terror of the 2011 Japan tsunami



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By Danielle Demetriou in Tokyo
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Maria loves reading novels, competing in archery and listening to a virtual pop star with blue hair called Hatsune Miku. So far, so normal for a 15-year-old Japanese schoolgirl.

But beneath her friendly demeanour, Maria is dealing with a tragedy that is far from ordinary: she was orphaned on March 11, 2011, when the Great East Japan earthquake struck and a tsunami swept away her mother, father, little sister and grandparents.

It was five years ago, on a grey Friday afternoon, that a magnitude-nine earthquake off the north-east coast of Japan shook the nation to the core, triggering a deadly tsunami that surged as high as 128 feet in places, travelling six miles inland.

The powerful tsunami submerged a string of coastal communities, claiming close to 19,000 lives in the process, as well as triggering the world's worst nuclear disaster in decades at the heavily damaged Fukushima power plant.

Over the past five years, the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami disaster has been well-documented: from the plight of tens of thousands who are still living in temporary accommodation and the painstakingly slow pace of coastal reconstruction to the problem-plagued nuclear plant clean-up.

Maria, who currently lives in an orphanage, was one of 236 children orphaned in the disaster, in addition to more than 1,000 other children who lost a single parent.



People offer a minute of silence for the victims at tsunami-devastated Abraham, coastal district of Sendai, northern Japan Photo: EPA

Maria, then aged ten, survived because she was at her school at the time, which was fortuitously located on an inland hill. Many others in her hometown Rikuzentakata, a coastal city in Iwate prefecture that was **described as being "wiped off the map" after the disaster**, were not so lucky. Her immediate family were among 2,000 out of 19,000 residents who lost their lives.

At 2.46pm – the precise time the earthquake struck five years ago – the nation paused briefly and united in grief: Tokyo's sprawling network of underground trains were halted, salarymen and shoppers paused in the streets and city bells were rung.

Shinzo Abe, the prime minister, offered flowers during a national ceremony in Tokyo attended by the Emperor and Empress, while communities across the country also lit candles and lanterns while bowing their heads in memory of those who had lost their lives.

Maria attended school as normal, with no special plans to mark the fifth anniversary.

Akemi Solloway, the founder of Aid for Japan, a UK-based charity which raises funds to provide emotional, educational and financial support for tsunami orphans, said: "She rarely mentions the tsunami – she recoils at the very word – and is doing all she can to put on a brave face.

"She came from a very tight-knit family, who were beloved by their local community – her grandparents in particular owned a popular karaoke bar and knew many people in the area.



Mark Kanekita (L), 37, and Sadakuni Ito, 62, throw flowers into the sea on the shore to offer prayers for victims at tsunami-devastated Abrahama, coastal district of Sendai, northern Japan Photo: EPA

"Like so many of the children we work with, Maria has shown incredible resilience in the face of tragedy. And today, she will go to school as normal, do her homework as normal and do little to acknowledge that another year has passed."

She added: "Maria is a very sweet girl, always trying to make the younger children in the orphanage smile. She recently passed entrance exams to go to an extremely well-respected private high school, winning a scholarship due to her academic excellence and her passion for Japanese archery.

"But she's shy, and often likes to escape from the world through novels and tales of far off lands – she's a real bookworm. Behind closed doors, she's battling with her demons."

Japan today is undoubtedly a different place compared to five years ago. Despite half a decade passing since the triple earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster, it will take significantly longer for the north-east region in particular to recover.

In particular, the situation at Fukushima nuclear power plant, where the delicate and decades-long task of decommissioning has been plagued with problems, continues to cast a shadow over recovery efforts.

More than half of the 150,000 families evacuated from residential areas near the plant reportedly remain displaced, with depression and suicide rates soaring among those still in temporary accommodation.



People observe a moment of silence at 2:46 p.m. for the victims of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami Photo: AP

Radiation-related health concerns also remain high on the agenda. **Sixteen children in Fukushima were diagnosed with thyroid cancer last month**, bringing the total number of confirmed cases since the disaster to 116, with a further 50 children suspected of having the disease.

Meanwhile, Naraha, a town located near the plant, became the first town to lift its evacuation order in September, although only 459 people – six per cent of the original community, according to AP – have since returned to live, reflecting the level of distrust in government assurances that it is safe to return.

Earlier this week, Tokyo Electric Power Co (Tepco), the operators of Fukushima plant, confirmed it could take four years to halt the problem of radioactive water leakages, a major obstacle to the decommissioning process.

The latest in a string of setbacks at the plant, the admission came just weeks after three senior Tepco executives – including the chairman at the time of the disaster – were **formally charged with negligence in relation to their handling of the crisis**.

Over the past five years, the nation's opposition to nuclear power has also grown from strength to strength, as reflected in the anti-nuclear demonstrations that took place across the country on the eve of the fifth anniversary.

As the protests took place, Mr Abe, the prime minister, took the opportunity to publicly reaffirmed his commitment to restarting nuclear reactors, despite such opposition.

"Our resource-poor country cannot do without nuclear power to secure the stability of energy supply while considering what makes economic sense and the issue of climate change," Mr Abe told a press conference.