

'Thank you, to each and every Québécois,' Japan's ambassador says

Meets with Premier Charest

BY KEVIN DOUGHERTY, GAZETTE QUEBEC BUREAU MARCH 16, 2011

QUEBEC — At a meeting Tuesday, scheduled before the March 11 earthquake and tsunami hit his country, Japan's ambassador in Ottawa, Kaoru Ishikawa, found himself explaining to Quebec Premier Jean Charest the devastation in his country.

The meeting was initially set to discuss a possible Canada-Japan free-trade agreement, the ambassador noted.

"There are many villages that are not answering," Ishikawa, who is fluent in French and English, told reporters after his meeting with the premier.

"And you can imagine what I mean."

The tsunami hit a 1,000-kilometre stretch of Japan's coast, with the most destruction in 350 kilometres of the coast where towns and villages are covered in mud, he said. Railway and road networks have been destroyed.

The ambassador said members of the Japanese army, called the self-defence force, are "trying to pull out the debris by hand."

Sniffer dogs from other countries are helping in the search for bodies.

"I am sure that there are survivors, but there are still municipalities that don't give us any answer," he added.

Helicopters, using U.S. Navy aircraft carriers as relay bases, have joined the search.

Ishikawa explained that in the affected section of the coast, the mountains run down to the sea in a sawtooth pattern that magnified the impact of tsunami waves 10 to 20 metres high, making them rise even higher.

"The water had to push up," he said, making motions with his hands.

Charest has offered Quebec's help in the form of emergency medical teams or material goods the homeless might need, and Ishikawa said because of the "exceptional situation," Japanese authorities are still not able to formulate concrete demands.

"The winter is as cold as yours and they have lost everything," he said.

Charest added that the International Red Cross in Geneva would co-ordinate aid to Japan and he expects the Red Cross to call on the Canadian and Quebec Red Cross as well.

Ishikawa attended the National Assembly question period, which was followed by a motion of condolences, and a minute of silence.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you, to each and every Québécois," Ishikawa said.

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