

Japan is handling calamities admirably

COMMENTARY JULEYKA LANTIGUA-WILLIAMS

I admire the way the Japanese people are dealing with their unfathomable disasters. Their grace, dignity and discipline serve as examples to us all.

I moved to Japan to teach English in 1998. I came to know many Japanese intimately, and met my closest friend who is more like the older sister I always wanted. I have traveled back frequently, occasionally venturing out of Tokyo and going even as far as Fukushima Prefecture, where Yuko's extended family resides. Thankfully, they are all fine "but bracing for the worst," she told me a couple of days ago.

It is heartbreaking to see all the rubble in a place where I saw lush and verdant mountains, historic Samurai-era villages, and thriving farming communities. But it is reassuring to witness how Japanese values have enabled them to push forward in this crisis.

Their characteristic restraint is serving them well. Images of hundreds of people waiting patiently in line for fuel or water or to enter a supermarket are not surprising. I have

witnessed such orderliness in Japan on countless occasions, especially during the maddening morning commute in Tokyo, when tens of thousands of people wait in line on platforms for the next train. Yuko tells me that Tokyo, though not nearly as affected as other areas, has seamlessly adapted to scheduled rolling blackouts to conserve energy.

Japanese connectedness is also an asset during this crisis. Information sharing has always been of the highest priority in Japan, which has a 99 percent literacy rate. Before the quake and tsunami, there were 115 million mobile phones in use, and 99 million Japanese used the Internet, making the country number three in the world behind China and the United States.

This is one of the world's most wired populations. During the crisis, information has been constant and widespread. National networks, newspapers, radios and Internet sources have provided a constant stream of updates at the local and national levels. Yuko says

that millions of foreigners in Japan have been receiving national news and information in their native languages, thanks to simultaneous translations in English, Korean, Portuguese and Spanish.

The Japanese have often been criticized as overly nationalistic, but that is a mischaracterization. They are a proud people, and they love for their country.

As Americans, we ought to be able to relate to that feeling.

And as Americans, we might want to take a cue from the Japanese about how to respond to the most devastating adversity.

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