

# Preparing for the Actual Worst: Supporting Japanese Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) From Okinawa



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Ishigaki City. Credit: Ken Watanabe, 2025  
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## Abstract

This report asks and answers two questions: (1) What are the weaknesses in the Government of Japan's (GOJ) current planning for receiving internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Okinawa prefecture? (2) How can GOJ, prefectural governments, and municipal governments better prepare to accept IDPs from Okinawa?

There are three primary weaknesses with GOJ's current civil protection planning. First, it assumes that in a Taiwan Strait contingency, GOJ will have the political will to declare an "anticipated armed attack situation" early enough for a smooth and timely evacuation. It also assumes away complicating factors such as inbound Taiwanese refugee flows and outbound U.S. military deployment during the "anticipated armed attack situation" period. Second, it does not present potential IDPs with a convincing explanation of why they should evacuate to where GOJ is directing them to during a Taiwan Strait contingency. Furthermore, by being indecisive about where potential IDPs will be evacuated to, GOJ undermines the efforts of the prefectures and municipalities preparing to accept IDPs. Finally, GOJ is asking prefectural and municipal governments to plan for the first one month of evacuation, not the years that a hypothetical U.S.-China war over Taiwan could last.

The experiences of IDPs from the March 11 triple disaster – the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake (GEJE) and associated tsunami and nuclear accident at Fukushima Daiichi – inform us that IDP-related policies will be more effective if they start with the assumption that once evacuated, IDPs are unlikely to return to Okinawa anytime soon. GOJ, prefectural, and municipal governments should offer support to IDPs from the very beginning with this long-term view. This will affect everything from Okinawans' willingness to be evacuated, how much and how quickly financial support is offered, and who financial support is offered to. GOJ should also offer support based on the individual IDP's present needs, instead of tying support to criteria such as when they fled or where they fled from. GOJ should prioritize offering long-term housing as soon as possible and creating an automatic, opt-out registration system to identify all IDPs, which will also allow GOJ to better communicate with IDPs and accurately assess IDPs' evolving needs over time. At the prefectural and municipal levels, government officials should begin to cooperate with relevant non-governmental organizations (NGOs), plan for the necessary bureaucratic reorganization to tackle the multi-

faceted challenge of supporting IDPs, and prepare to deal with misinformation and disinformation about support for IDPs.

The lessons drawn from the March 11 experience for GOJ's contingency planning can also inform the Netherlands and European Union (EU) member states' planning for accepting and supporting IDPs associated with an invasion of an EU member state, climate change-related impacts, or other natural disaster.

## Author's Note

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## Introduction

In response to increased Chinese pressure on Taiwan, the Government of Japan (GOJ) is preparing for a Taiwan Strait contingency.<sup>1</sup> GOJ is upgrading Japan's defense strategy, building up Japan's defense capabilities, and strengthening Japan's alliance with the United States while beginning to more seriously prepare for civil protection (*kokumin hogo*).<sup>2</sup> Civil protection includes the evacuation of Japanese residents from Okinawa prefecture. Yonaguni

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<sup>1</sup> This report does *not* make a claim about the likelihood or likely trajectory of any specific Taiwan Strait contingency (i.e., how China, the United States, and/or Japan will act in the future), but analyzes and critiques GOJ's civil protection planning based on the worst-case *assumption* of a U.S.-China war over Taiwan in which Japan is also involved. China's "One China" principle declares that "there is but one China in the world, the Taiwan region is an inalienable part of China's territory, and the Government of the People's Republic of China is the sole legal government representing the whole of China" (2025 China's Position Paper on UNGA Resolution 2758). Thus, China considers Taiwan to be a renegade province, cross-Strait relations to be an internal matter, and has not ruled out the use of force to bring the island under its control. Under the "One China" policy, the United States "*acknowledges* the Chinese position that there is but one China and Taiwan is part of China" (1979 U.S.-China Joint Communiqué, emphasis added) and Japan "*fully understands and respects* the [Chinese] stand" that "Taiwan is an inalienable part of the territory of the People's Republic of China" (1972 Sino-Japanese Joint Communiqué, emphases added). However, the United States and Japan have *not* accepted or endorsed the Chinese position. According to the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, the United States will "consider any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means, including by boycotts or embargoes, a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States," and the 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy (p. 23) states that, "detering a conflict over Taiwan, ideally by preserving military overmatch, is a priority. We will also maintain our longstanding declaratory policy on Taiwan, meaning that the United States does not support any unilateral change to the status quo in the Taiwan Strait." Through such statements, the United States – and by extension, Japan – maintain a position of strategic ambiguity vis-à-vis the defense of Taiwan. Japan's 2015 security legislation would allow for Japan to aid the United States in the defense of Taiwan should the United States intervene, and Japan is building up its own capabilities in the southwestern islands to deter China by denial.

<sup>2</sup> For more on Japan's assessment of Chinese activities around Taiwan, see Japan's 2025 Defense White Paper (Ministry of Defense 2025, pp. 16-17). For recent developments in Japan's defense policy, see the 2022 national security documents: the National Security Strategy (Ministry of Defense 2022a), National Defense Strategy (Ministry of Defense 2025b), and Defense Buildup Program (Ministry of Defense 2022c). For more on Japan's civil defense policy, see Takeda, Ito, and Kawashima (2023).

island – one of the Sakishima islands and the Japanese island closest to Taiwan – is only 111km away from Taiwan.<sup>3</sup>

In March 2025, GOJ unveiled a draft plan to evacuate 110,000 residents and 10,000 tourists over six days from Okinawa prefecture’s Sakishima islands to Kyūshū and Honshū islands during an “anticipated armed attack situation” (*buryoku kōgeki yosoku jitai*) in the Taiwan Strait.<sup>4</sup> GOJ has designated eight prefectures to receive the internally displaced persons (IDPs) and commissioned these eight prefectural governments to plan for how to receive and support the IDPs in their first month of evacuation, providing local transportation, accommodations, meals, and daily necessities.<sup>5</sup> These eight prefectures have in turn designated 32 municipalities to receive the IDPs.<sup>6</sup>

These efforts build on past efforts. Tabletop exercises have been held in March 2023 and January 2024.<sup>7</sup> Large-scale drills in fiscal 2026 (April 2026-March 2027) will iron out some of the “key points” of this draft plan, e.g., how to coordinate among the central, prefectural, and municipal governments and private transportation companies. These plans are works-in-progress and will continue to be refined over the coming years.<sup>8</sup> After “studying wide-area

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<sup>3</sup> GOJ publicly maintains the position that the evacuation plan “does not assume a particular incident,” but media accounts report that it is intended to prepare Japan for a Taiwan Strait contingency (e.g., Kobayashi 2025).

<sup>4</sup> For details, see the draft plan posted on the Cabinet Secretariat Civil Protection Portal Site: [https://www.kokuminhogo.go.jp/pdf/ukeire\\_20250327\\_torikumi.pdf](https://www.kokuminhogo.go.jp/pdf/ukeire_20250327_torikumi.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> This report characterizes Japanese residents who may, in the future, be evacuated from Okinawa by GOJ or voluntarily flee from Okinawa because of a Taiwan Strait contingency “internally displaced persons” (IDPs). It also calls Japanese residents who had to move because of the March 11 triple disaster “IDPs.” This is because both groups of persons meet the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement as “persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict (author: a Taiwan Strait contingency), situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters (author: the March 11 triple disaster), and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border” (High Commissioner for Refugees 2004). In the case of IDPs, national governments have the primary responsibility to protect and assist them.

<sup>6</sup> The eight prefectures are: Fukuoka, Kagoshima, Kumamoto, Miyazaki, Nagasaki, Ōita, Saga, and Yamaguchi.

<sup>7</sup> Teraoka (2025).

<sup>8</sup> Miyakojima city municipal government official, personal communication, July 29, 2025; Ishigaki city municipal government official, personal communication, August 6, 2025; Yonaguni town municipal government official, personal communication, August 6, 2025.

evacuation and acceptance of residents, including those in the southwestern region,” GOJ plans to compile additional guidelines by March 2027.<sup>9</sup> The guidelines are expected to cover issues such as education and employment issues in case of prolonged evacuation.<sup>10</sup>

The map below depicts the five municipalities from which IDPs may flow *out of* in red, and the 32 municipalities to which IDPs may flow *into* in blue.

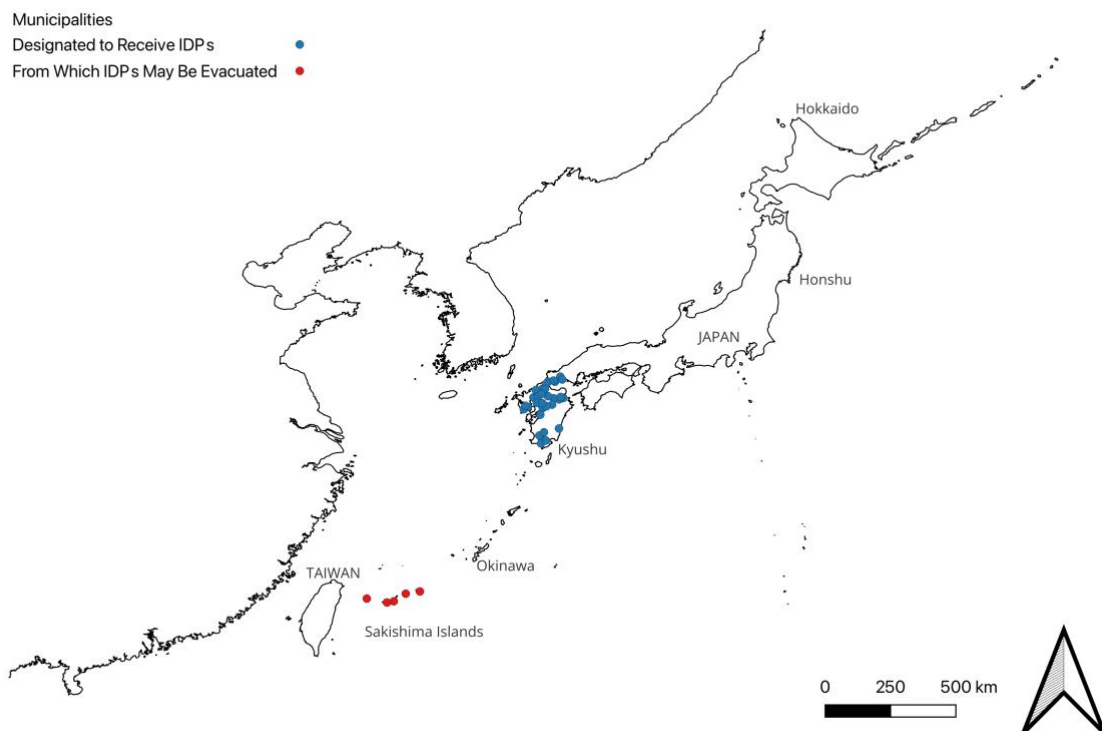


Figure 1: Map of Municipalities From Which IDPs May Be Evacuated and Municipalities that are Designated to Receive IDPs (Source: Map made with QGIS using data from Natural Earth and coordinates from Google)

Since the tentative plan was announced in March 2025, a meeting was held with the governors of Kyushū prefectures on October 27, 2025. The Kyushū governors affirmed their position of continuing to respond in cooperation with GOJ. The mayors of the five Sakishima municipalities also attended for the first time, and they requested expansion of airports that can accept IDPs. This could mean either expanding the number of receiving airports or

<sup>9</sup> McElhiney and Koja (2025).

<sup>10</sup> Jiji (2025a).

increasing the operation of airports to 24-hours during the evacuation, as the mayors of Taketomi town and Ishigaki city suggested, respectively.<sup>11</sup> They also requested shortening the transit time for IDPs with special needs.<sup>12</sup> On November 18, 2025, Miyakojima city conducted a drill; after Ishigaki city's in 2024, it is the second of its kind. The drill, conducted at Miyakojima Airport, simulated security checks and guidance procedures (e.g., providing wheel chairs and oxygen tanks for those who need them), and will be used to improve future planning (e.g., calculating the approximate time for an individual to go from the security check to boarding).<sup>13</sup> Okinawa prefecture and the Fire and Disaster Management Agency also participated in this drill.<sup>14</sup>

This report asks and answers two questions: (1) What are the weaknesses in GOJ's current planning? (2) How can GOJ, prefectural governments, and municipal governments better prepare to accept IDPs from Okinawa? The first question is answered through a critical examination of current planning.<sup>15</sup> The second question is answered by assessing how well GOJ, prefectural, and municipal governments supported IDPs from the March 11 triple disaster – the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake (GEJE) and associated tsunami and nuclear accident at Fukushima Daiichi. Variation in how well prefectural governments supported the IDPs is particularly interesting and useful for drawing lessons to prepare for future IDPs.

The analysis in this report is based on: Japanese laws, GOJ and prefectural governments' draft plans, notes from the opinion exchange meetings that the Yonaguni municipal government hosted in September/October 2023 and the Ishigaki municipal government hosted in August

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<sup>11</sup> *Okinawa Times* (2025a).

<sup>12</sup> *Yomiuri Shimbun* (2025a).

<sup>13</sup> *Okinawa Times* (2025b).

<sup>14</sup> *Okinawa Times* (2025c). In addition to evacuation planning, GOJ is also constructing underground evacuation shelters to accommodate residents for about two weeks on Sakishima islands. These are intended for those unable to evacuate and officials assisting with evacuations. Yonaguni town's underground evacuation shelter is expected to accommodate 200 people and be completed around spring 2028. Miyakojima city's and Ishigaki city's shelters will each accommodate 500 people; construction will begin in winter 2025/2026 and spring 2026, respectively. Taketomi town and Tarama village are expected to design their plans in 2026 (*Jiji* 2025b; McElhiney and Koja 2025).

<sup>15</sup> This research was undertaken between July 2025 and January 2026. Readers interested in this topic and reading this report in April 2026 and beyond should consult GOJ's most up-to-date guidelines.

2024;<sup>16</sup> contemporary English- and Japanese-language news coverage of the evacuation draft plans; English- and Japanese-language secondary literature on the experiences of IDPs from the March 11 triple disaster; the author's video and in-person interviews with experts in Japan and the Netherlands in August and October 2025; and the author's phone and email interviews with municipal government officials from Sakishima islands' five municipalities – Ishigaki city, Miyakojima city, Yonaguni town, Taketomi town, and Tarama village – in July/August 2025.<sup>17</sup>

To be clear, this author, GOJ, and the Japanese people hope that deterrence and diplomacy will succeed, and peace will prevail across the Taiwan Strait. However, robust, reliable civil defense is itself critical for deterrence and diplomacy, by giving leaders the confidence that their citizens will be safe even if they do not yield to the aggressor's demands, and thus providing leaders with more options during crisis bargaining.<sup>18</sup> The robustness and reliability of Japan's civil defense, i.e., the security of Japan's noncombatant citizens, will affect GOJ's calculations about support for allied U.S. forces, e.g., base access, logistical support, and asset protection, and Japan's own direct action against China.<sup>19</sup> GOJ needs to take the time that it has now to be prepared as possible to support the post-evacuation lives of IDPs from Okinawa prefecture.<sup>20</sup> Being as prepared as possible means planning based on realistic assumptions and drawing appropriate lessons from Japan's past experiences with IDPs.

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<sup>16</sup> These notes were provided by the municipal governments. Though they captured residents' critical comments, there may still be some bias introduced by the fact that only the governments' summaries are available. Note that Miyakojima city also held an "Open House"-style event from October 28 to November 1, 2025, where government officials provided information to Miyakojima residents about evacuation planning (Miyakojima City 2025). However, I could not find notes about residents' reaction to the "panels" explaining the government position.

<sup>17</sup> Municipal government officials' names are anonymized.

<sup>18</sup> Teraoka (2025).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> There are a range of Taiwan Strait contingencies possible, a U.S.-China war involving Japan is only one. The specific trajectory of the contingency, including GOJ's response, could affect the safety of designated evacuation routes, how long citizens can be safely evacuated for, how long the displacement period will last for, and many other factors. However, that is beyond the scope of this report. The insights and lessons learned are framed to be generalizable enough for a broad range of scenarios while keeping the most severe and consequential potential outcome that GOJ needs to be prepared for front and center.



## 1. Weaknesses in the Current Draft

Since GOJ announced their draft in March 2025, many logistical issues have already come to light. For example, there may not be enough bus drivers to transport IDPs from their point of arrival on the main islands – either at Fukuoka airport, Kagoshima airport, or Kagoshima seaport – to their designated recipient municipality.<sup>21</sup> Hotels and inns may refuse to accept IDPs if GOJ does not increase how much they will pay for accommodations,<sup>22</sup> and business travelers and tourists may refuse to refrain from traveling to the designated recipient municipalities during that first month of evacuation as GOJ planning assumes.<sup>23</sup> It is also unclear if six days is fast enough to get everyone to safety in an “anticipated armed attack situation.”<sup>24</sup> The goal is double the transit capacity during peacetime and does not account for the effect of inclement weather. Setting aside these logistical issues – the 2026 drills will likely identify even more – this reports raises three broader weaknesses in GOJ’s current draft.

### 1.1 Requiring an “Anticipated Armed Attack Situation”

GOJ planning is based on the 2004 Civil Protection Law,<sup>25</sup> which requires GOJ to issue an evacuation order *after* an “anticipated armed attack situation” has been declared, which assumes evacuation will take place *before* an armed attack has commenced. This is an important assumption because if this condition is *not* met and the attack has already started, private airplane and ferry companies may refuse to cooperate with GOJ in evacuating

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<sup>21</sup> *Mainichi Shimbun* (2025); Yamaguchi, Ikezono, and Shimada (2025).

<sup>22</sup> Cabinet Secretariat Situations Response and Crisis Management (2025); Yamaguchi, Ikezono, and Shimada (2025). Currently, the legal cap is 7,000 yen per person, per night including meals. But the average cost for a night per person *not* including meals in Fukuoka prefecture is 12,000 yen.

<sup>23</sup> Yamaguchi, Ikezono, and Shimada (2025).

<sup>24</sup> Koja and McElhiney (2025).

<sup>25</sup> *Yomiuri Shimbun* (2025b). Under the Civil Protection Law, relief activities are carried out mainly by prefectural governors in cooperation with municipal governments and the Japanese Red Cross Society, and focus on (1) providing temporary accommodation, food and medical supplies to evacuated people, and (2) collecting and providing information on missing persons and those separated from their families. As the law’s emphasis on “temporary” accommodation makes clear, the relief activities under the Civil Protection Law are not designed for long-term relief. See the Cabinet Secretariat Civil Protection Portal Site for more details: <https://www.kokuminhogo.go.jp/en/about/law.html>.

Sakishima residents. Though Ishigaki city mayor Yoshitaka Nakayama publicly requested on X that GOJ consider a three-day timeline for evacuation in April 2025,<sup>26</sup> the real problem is not only how *long* the evacuation will take but also how *soon* evacuation can begin.

Given current U.S. intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance advantages and the extensive visible preparations required for a full-scale Chinese invasion of Taiwan, Japan could plausibly receive weeks to months of early warning to declare an “anticipated armed attack situation,” though the exact warning time would depend on contemporary operational capacity and political context.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, as a Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) Diet member from Okinawa said, GOJ should make such a declaration as soon as it sees any sign of an emergency. However, doing so will be “highly political.”<sup>28</sup>

GOJ’s bureaucracy has been reorganized in recent years to increase the prime minister’s ability to act more decisively, especially in matters of national security and diplomacy.<sup>29</sup> However, this introduces the prime minister’s personality and idiosyncratic preferences as a key determining factor in how GOJ would react to a Taiwan Strait contingency, including *when* an “anticipated armed attack situation” will be declared.

Declaring an “anticipated armed attack situation” will likely be approached with caution, to varying degrees, depending on who sits in the *Kantei* (the prime minister’s office), as it is an unprecedented move and will have strategic consequences. It will “send signals to adversaries, potentially provoking them and inadvertently escalating the situation. For instances, adversaries might interpret the start of evacuations as a cue to initiate live-fire exchanges, even when peace remains a possibility.”<sup>30</sup> Sakishima residents also note that China might take it as a sign that Japan has given up on diplomacy.<sup>31</sup> Declaring an “anticipated armed attack situation” allows GOJ to order the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to stand by, and other countries

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<sup>26</sup> Koja and McElhiney (2025).

<sup>27</sup> Gady (2025, pp. 54, 151).

<sup>28</sup> *Yomiuri Shimbun* (2025c).

<sup>29</sup> Fukushima and Samuels (2018).

<sup>30</sup> Teraoka (2025).

<sup>31</sup> Ishigaki City August 2 Opinion Exchange Meeting (2024); Ishigaki City August 6 Opinion Exchange Meeting (2024).

may criticize Japan for unilaterally escalating the situation.<sup>32</sup> As then-mayor of Yonaguni town, Kenichi Itokazu, said to foreign media in February 2025, “From our point of view, we want to be evacuated early. But the national government will be concerned with the optics of jumping the gun if people are evacuated unnecessarily. There is also the risk that the evacuation order will be too late.”<sup>33</sup>

Because of the political challenges and diplomatic sensitivities around declaring an “anticipated armed attack situation,”<sup>34</sup> many Sakishima residents doubt that evacuation will proceed under such benign conditions, i.e., before an armed attack has commenced.<sup>35</sup> Given Okinawa’s tragic history with government-mandated evacuations in WWII,<sup>36</sup> GOJ must demonstrate that they are taking the IDPs’ safety seriously.

This will require either (a) abandoning the “anticipated armed attack situation” assumption and planning based on an armed attack having already begun, (b) making a credible commitment to declare an “anticipated armed attack situation” early enough for evacuation to be complete before the attack begins, or (c) allowing for the evacuation of residents before an “anticipated armed attack situation” is declared. Of these three options, the last one is the easiest to implement.

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<sup>32</sup> *Yomiuri Shimbun* (2025c). As one Ishigaki city resident pointed out at an opinion exchange meeting, there is also the possibility that the conflict starts with a preemptive missile strike from Ishigaki island. The government representative responded that they are not making any plans based on such a scenario (Ishigaki City August 5 Opinion Exchange Meeting 2024).

<sup>33</sup> Sim (2025).

<sup>34</sup> Even now – in peacetime – China is trying to portray Japanese evacuation planning as malign, anti-Chinese behavior. *The Global Times*, a Chinese newspaper owned by the *People’s Daily*, headlined an article in March that “‘Japan incites sense of crisis to serve political purpose’ by releasing first evacuation plan for islets near Taiwan” (Wanshi 2025).

<sup>35</sup> Ishigaki City August 1 Opinion Exchange Meeting (2024); Ishigaki City August 2 Opinion Exchange Meeting (2024); Ishigaki City August 5 Opinion Exchange Meeting (2024); Ishigaki City August 6 Opinion Exchange Meeting (2024). During one of the meetings, a government official admitted that the plan might be naïve (*amai*).

<sup>36</sup> F. Nozoe, personal communication, August 7, 2025; *Jiji* (2025a). In August 1944, a U.S. submarine torpedoed the *Tsushima Maru* - killing 1,484 people including 784 school children - traveling from Okinawa to Nagasaki as part of a government-mandated evacuation (Tanahashi 2025).

Under the 2004 Civil Protection Law, Sakishima residents who flee before the government declares an “anticipated armed attack situation” and orders an evacuation will receive no financial support to compensate them for their evacuation.<sup>37</sup> Instead of *discouraging* Sakishima residents from fleeing until GOJ is ready to declare an “anticipated armed attack situation,” GOJ should *incentivize* Sakishima residents to flee on their own terms while it is still safe to do so. The fewer people need to be evacuated after an “anticipated armed attack situation” has been declared, the faster and smoother the official evacuation of the remaining residents can proceed.

Broadly speaking, it would be useful to separate compensated evacuation for non-vulnerable individuals and incentivized evacuation for vulnerable individuals. Vulnerable individuals are those who will have the most difficulty evacuating under chaotic conditions or whose evacuation under “anticipated armed attack situation” may present additional challenges, such as the elderly, the chronically ill, and those with special needs. Compensated evacuation for non-vulnerable individuals would cover the actual cost of moving to the main islands, and perhaps a starter fund to help the individual settle into life on the main islands. In addition to covering the costs of the move and a possible starter fund, incentivized evacuation would also offer a clear and long-term plan about what support GOJ will offer once the vulnerable individual has moved, e.g., which elderly care facility or hospital will take them in and how their day-to-day expenses – including rent, utilities, and groceries – will be covered.

To give a sense of scale of who could qualify for incentivized evacuation as a vulnerable individual, at a minimum, it should be offered to the estimated 220 individuals who would require evacuation by helicopter because their condition is severe or they require medical attention during transportation. At a maximum, it could be offered to the estimated 6,460 individuals who are classified as elderly, chronically ill, and having special needs.<sup>38</sup> This will not be cheap, but the alternative that GOJ is currently proposing is to evacuate these vulnerable individuals *during* an “anticipated armed attack situation.” Whether these vulnerable individuals arrive on the main islands before or after an “anticipated armed attack

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<sup>37</sup> Ishigaki City August 6 Opinion Exchange Meeting (2024).

<sup>38</sup> Cabinet Secretariat Situations Response and Crisis Management (2025, p. 5).

situation” has been declared, GOJ will need to offer some kind of ongoing financial assistance once they are on the main islands.<sup>39</sup>

Revising the 2004 Civil Protection Law or passing a new law to allow for the compensation or incentivization of voluntary self-evacuations before an “anticipated armed attack situation” has been declared will allow GOJ to maintain maximum flexibility in international diplomacy without compromising the safety of the Japanese people. It will also ease the logistical challenges of a last-minute, government-operated evacuation and likely to lead to a better post-evacuation life for the IDPs who choose to self-evacuate. With more time to plan, the IDPs are more likely to land somewhere they have relatives or preexisting social networks,<sup>40</sup> and this will ease their integration into the receiving community.

Relatedly, GOJ planning assumes away complicating factors, such as inbound Taiwanese refugee flows and outbound U.S. military deployment. Yonaguni town residents as well as GOJ officials with knowledge of Japan’s emergency planning have been criticizing the lack of planning for incoming Taiwanese refugees since 2023.<sup>41</sup> Ishigaki city residents more recently raised the concern that GOJ does not account for the U.S. military trying to deploy to the Sakishima islands at the same time as the government-mandated evacuation for civilians.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Before dismissing the idea of compensated or incentivized evacuation as too expensive, GOJ, the Okinawa prefectural government, and Sakishima municipal governments should conduct a survey of Okinawa residents. It is possible that very few individuals would take advantage of such a program anyways – preferring to stay put – but every individual that moves during peacetime is an individual that does not have to be evacuated if there is ever an “anticipated armed attack situation.”

<sup>40</sup> Ishigaki City August 5 Opinion Exchange Meeting (2024); Yonaguni Town Opinion Exchange Meeting Survey (2024).

<sup>41</sup> Kelly, Kaneko and Toyoda (2023). For more on Japan’s refugee policy, see Barbour (2024). In December 2024, the Japan-Taiwan Exchange Association and Taiwan-Japan Relations Association took an important step forward when they signed an agreement to share information about non-Japanese people who enter Japan from Taiwan to prevent secret agents and terrorists from entering Japan and conducting subversive acts. Though this agreement falls short of addressing a potential Taiwanese refugee crisis, at least it acknowledges the need to evacuate Japanese citizens from Taiwan and how the presence of Chinese agents disguised as Taiwanese refugees could complicate those efforts (*Yomiuri Shimbun* 2025d).

<sup>42</sup> Ishigaki City August 1 Opinion Exchange Meeting (2024); Ishigaki City August 5 Opinion Exchange Meeting (2024); Ishigaki City August 6 Opinion Exchange Meeting (2024). The United States Marine Corps (USMC) will likely be trying to deploy to the Sakishima islands under the doctrine of Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations

## 1.2 Lacking Transparency and Commitment

GOJ planning waffles on where the IDPs should go and why. It is legitimate to say that which prefectures and municipalities receive IDPs may need to change depending on the circumstances at the time of the actual crisis: whether it is due to limited accommodations capacity or based on GOJ's comprehensive judgment of the situation and other countries' intentions at the time, considering factors such as which regions are in danger, which regions are safe, and whether evacuation routes have been secured.<sup>43</sup>

However, GOJ needs to present a compelling argument to the IDPs that they will be safer in the new locations than GOJ is proposing they evacuate to than they would be staying in Okinawa prefecture. Sakishima residents question whether Kyūshū island is safer – given that it hosts multiple SDF bases and a U.S. naval base and therefore, may also be targeted by China in a Taiwan Strait contingency – or if “anywhere” in Japan is safe.<sup>44</sup> Sakishima residents may prefer to be evacuated where they have family and support networks – whether that is the Okinawa main island or Tokyo – than to random municipalities on Kyūshū island or in Yamaguchi prefecture.<sup>45</sup>

Without a compelling argument to reassure Sakishima residents that the municipalities they are being relocated to are safe and appropriate for long-term stay, residents may refuse to evacuate given that there are no legal penalties.<sup>46</sup> In September/October 2023, only 45% of

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(EABO) at the same time (F. Nozoe, personal communication, August 7, 2025; *Kyodo News* 2021; U.S. Marine Corps 2023).

<sup>43</sup> Ishigaki city municipal government official, personal communication, August 6, 2025; Miyakojima city municipal government official, personal communication, July 29, 2025; Okumura (2025). Six of the eight designated prefectures' draft plans refer to “GOJ's comprehensive judgment of the situation and other countries' intentions,” and Nagasaki prefecture's draft plan explicitly states that the experiences and lessons learned from future trainings should feed into decisions about where IDPs are sent to, and the number of IDPs each prefecture is expected to take in, and which municipalities receive IDPs within the prefecture.

<sup>44</sup> Ishigaki City August 6 Opinion Exchange Meeting (2024).

<sup>45</sup> Ishigaki City August 5 Opinion Exchange Meeting (2024); Tarama village municipal government official, personal communication, July 30, 2025; Yonaguni Town Opinion Exchange Meeting Survey (2024).

<sup>46</sup> *Mainichi Shimbun* (2025); Yamaguchi, Ikezono, and Shimada (2025).

the 73 survey respondents from Yonaguni town said they would wish to be evacuated if there was an evacuation order, and 47% said they would not wish to be evacuated.<sup>47</sup>

Why did GOJ choose these eight prefectures to receive IDPs? In a question-and-answer session with the prime minister, a Diet member asked why GOJ was moving IDPs to prefectures where there are also U.S. military and SDF bases, and on what basis GOJ determined that these evacuation destinations were safe.<sup>48</sup> Then-Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru answered that GOJ chose the eight recipient prefectures because (a) Article 32, Paragraph 1 of the Civil Protection Act states that, “With regard to the evacuation of Okinawa prefecture residents, the national government must exercise special consideration, including establishing a system for the appropriate implementation of evacuations on Okinawa island and on remote islands far from the mainland. To this end, the national government will establish a wide-area coordination system with local governments, including the Kyūshū prefectures,” and (b) the Kyūshū prefectures, Yamaguchi prefecture, and Okinawa prefecture had a “Kyūshū-Yamaguchi Prefectures Mutual Support Agreement in the Event of Armed Attack Disasters, etc.” that provides the basis for evacuating and accepting residents across prefectural boundaries.<sup>49</sup> However, this does not provide a clear answer to the original question: Why, then, were the Kyūshū prefectures specified in Article 32, Paragraph 1 of the Civil Protection Act? And (perhaps this is a question better directed to the prefectural government): why did Okinawa form a Mutual Support Agreement with Yamaguchi and Kyūshū prefectures?

Other factors that influenced the selection likely include the eight prefectures’ historical relationship with Okinawa prefecture, the size of the receiving prefectures, and whether the municipality had the hotel/inn capacity to accommodate whole districts for a period of one month, i.e., everyone from one district can stay in the same hotel/inn or a couple of the same hotels/inns.<sup>50</sup> This “availability” criteria is based on the optimistic assumptions that a) all

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<sup>47</sup> Yonaguni Town Opinion Exchange Meeting Survey (2024).

<sup>48</sup> Japan’s House of Representatives (2025a).

<sup>49</sup> Japan’s House of Representatives (2025b).

<sup>50</sup> Okumura (2025); Yonaguni town municipal government official, personal communication, August 6, 2025. This report uses the term “district” but the literal translation is “elementary school district.” These range greatly in size from 100 to 1,000 individuals.

rooms will be available because business travelers, tourists, etc. will refrain from traveling to the designated municipalities during the one month and b) hotels/inns will accept IDPs.<sup>51</sup>

When government representatives dodge residents' questions about why they are being evacuated to where they are by answering that these eight prefectures and 32 municipalities are being used for "planning purposes" without answering the question,<sup>52</sup> it undermines public trust in the planning process. Public trust is essential for a smooth, voluntary evacuation. GOJ needs to decide for itself whether Kyūshū island will be safe or not. If it is not safe, GOJ should consider evacuating Sakishima residents further away from the Taiwan Strait – either the northern part of Honshū island or even Hokkaido island.

GOJ also needs to decide for itself whether the Okinawa main island will be safe or not. Okinawa prefecture hosts 32 U.S. military facilities. Most of U.S. military bases are concentrated in the central and southern part of Okinawa main island, and account for 15% of land in Okinawa main island.<sup>53</sup> Okinawa prefecture also hosts twenty-two designated SDF facilities: twelve for the Ground Self-Defense Forces (GSDF), three for the Maritime Self-Defense Forces (MSDF), and seven for the Air Self-Defense Forces (ASDF). Three of these are hosted on Miyakojima, two on Yonaguni, and one on Ishigaki.<sup>54</sup> If the Okinawa main island is not safe, then GOJ also needs to plan for evacuating residents from the Okinawa main island. For now, the government's position is that evacuation is being planned for the Sakishima islands first because of Sakishima's remoteness; eventually, the government will also develop

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<sup>51</sup> Cabinet Secretariat Situations Response and Crisis Management (2025); Yamaguchi, Ikezono, and Shimada (2025). The validity of the assumption that business travelers and tourists will refrain from traveling to the designated municipalities hinges on the exact nature of the contingency. *If there is an all-out war, then personal and business travel to southern Japan is likely to cease but it is unclear how domestic and international travelers will react to any type of contingency short of that.*

<sup>52</sup> Ishigaki City August 27 Opinion Exchange Meeting (2024); Yonaguni Town Opinion Exchange Meeting Summary (2024).

<sup>53</sup> Information Portal of Military Bases on Okinawa (2016).

<sup>54</sup> Ministry of Defense (n.d.). For more on the bases being built on Sakishima islands, see Pollmann (2026).

evacuation plans for the Okinawa main island.<sup>55</sup> GOJ has already designated all of Okinawa prefecture as requiring resident evacuations in an “anticipated armed attack situation.”<sup>56</sup>

Okinawa prefecture has been developing civil protection plans since 2006, and most recently updated it in 2018.<sup>57</sup> Okinawa prefecture’s plan assumes that residents of remote islands, including Sakishima islands, will first be evacuated to the Okinawa main island, and then to the Japanese main islands.<sup>58</sup> This is *not* the same as the GOJ plan, which moves residents straight from Ishigaki island or Miyakojima island to the Japanese main islands.<sup>59</sup> Further coordination and harmonization between GOJ and Okinawa prefecture is necessary for evacuations on-the-ground to operate smoothly. This will be a political as well as bureaucratic challenge as the conservative Sakishima island mayors have a better relationship with Tokyo than the Okinawa prefectural government. More broadly speaking, GOJ’s hesitation to be explicit that the planning is for a Taiwan Strait contingency – to avoid provoking China – makes it more difficult for coordination between GOJ and Okinawa prefecture.<sup>60</sup>

GOJ’s unwillingness to commit can also have an unintended, negative side effect if it demoralizes officials from the eight prefectures and 32 municipalities designated to receive IDPs. Prefectural and municipal government officials may be discouraged from planning seriously and investing the resources they need to invest to receive IDPs if they know that their efforts might be wasted if, in a real crisis, GOJ directs the IDPs elsewhere. As of early August 2025, working-level officials at Yonaguni town and Saga prefecture have started

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<sup>55</sup> Ishigaki City August 27 Opinion Exchange Meeting (2024); Japan’s House of Representatives (2025b). Planning for evacuation from Okinawa main island will present a different set of interesting political challenges, as the Okinawa Governor has a more confrontational relationship with Tokyo compared to the conservative mayors of Sakishima islands (F. Nozoe, personal communication, August 7, 2025; Teraoka 2025).

<sup>56</sup> Tanahashi, Ono, Kaji, Soeda, and Sasagawa (2024).

<sup>57</sup> Okinawa Prefecture (2018).

<sup>58</sup> Okinawa Prefecture (n.d., p. 24).

<sup>59</sup> Cabinet Secretariat Situations Response and Crisis Management (2025, p. 1).

<sup>60</sup> *Jiji* (2025a). Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi’s remarks at the Lower House Budget Committee meeting on November 7, 2025, indicates the *possibility* that GOJ is more willing to be open about its position in a Taiwan Strait contingency. However, given that the remarks were “ad-libbed” (Tajima and Shiromi 2025), it is more likely that GOJ will maintain its circumspect position on speaking about a Taiwan Strait contingency. This is *not* to say that more detailed planning is not taking place behind the scenes.

working together and the governor of Saga prefecture visited Yonaguni town. Tarama village government officials have had an online meeting with officials from Kumamoto prefecture and Yatsushiro city, and they are planning on working more closely together going forward.<sup>61</sup> Maintaining momentum to invest in these kinds of relationships requires GOJ to be willing to make a commitment that there is a *reasonably* high likelihood that the designated prefecture and municipality is where the IDPs will go in a real crisis because it is reasonable to assume that they will be safer or safe enough there. This will depend a great deal on the nature of the contingency, which GOJ has refrained from speculating on (at least publicly) in their planning.

### 1.3 Planning for the Short-Term

GOJ's current planning does not look past the first month of evacuation. To be fair to GOJ, it is a work-in-progress and a plan for the "early stages" of evacuation. But as the plans become more developed, what will happen in the later stages of evacuation must inform these early-stage decisions as they will have downstream effects. When the draft plan was announced, then-Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshimasa Hayashi stated that, "For the future, we will need to consider how to support education and work *in case* evacuees need to stay for longer than a month" (emphasis added).<sup>62</sup> However, it is almost a guarantee that in any Taiwan Strait contingency scenario, IDPs will not be able to return for longer than a month.

If GOJ declares an "anticipated armed attack situation" early and begins evacuation in the months leading up to a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, then the invasion might not even have started at the one-month mark. If diplomacy and deterrence fail and if the United States decides to intervene on behalf of Taiwan, then any U.S.-China war over Taiwan could extend into several years.<sup>63</sup> Even though it is impossible to predict the extent of damage in any particular scenario, it will take time to reconstruct civilian infrastructure, whether it was damaged by Chinese attacks or SDF and/or U.S. military use. GOJ has not yet thought

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<sup>61</sup> Ishigaki city municipal government official, personal communication, August 6, 2025; Tarama village municipal government official, personal communication, July 30, 2025; Yonaguni town municipal government official, personal communication, August 6, 2025.

<sup>62</sup> Koja and McElhiney (2025).

<sup>63</sup> Gady (2025, pp. 207-208); U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff (2016, p. 49).

through how long postwar reconstruction will take.<sup>64</sup> Sakishima residents themselves are acutely aware of the fact that evacuation is unlikely to be short, and whether or not receiving municipalities can accept IDPs for an extended period will affect their calculation about whether to evacuate or not.<sup>65</sup>

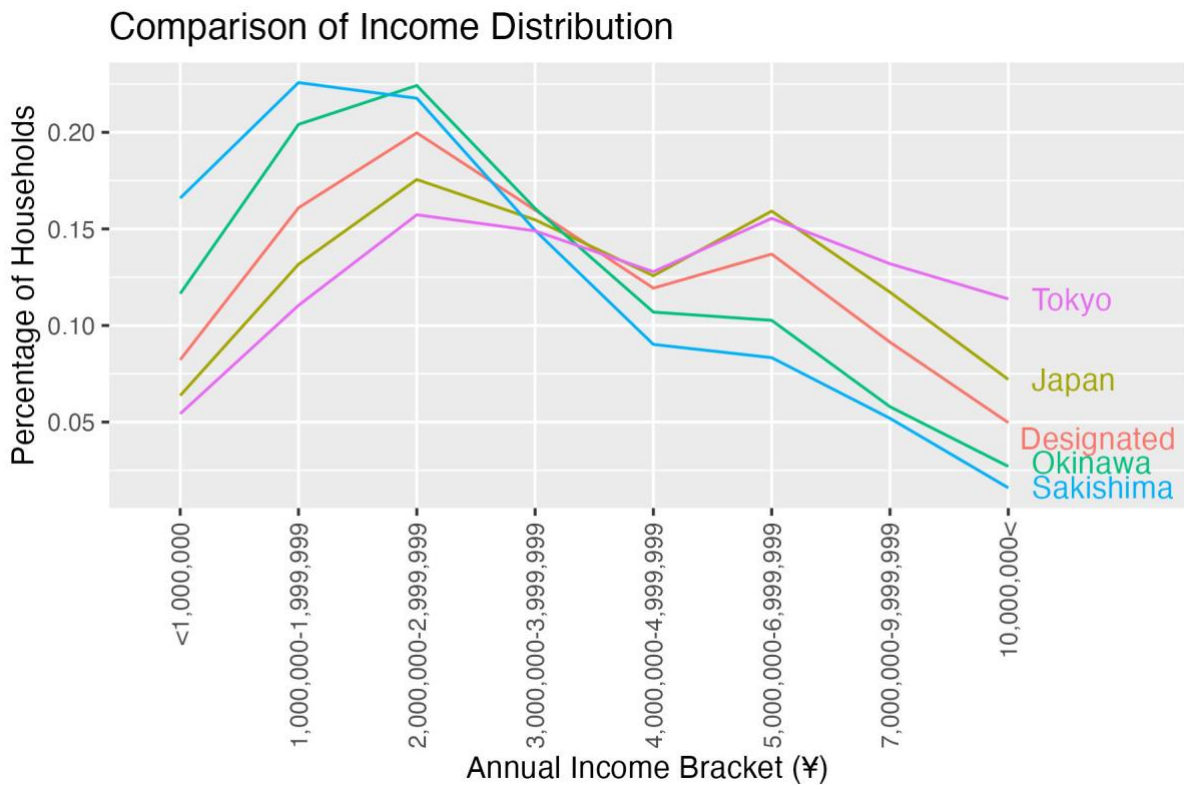


Figure 1: Comparison of Annual Household Income Distribution (Source: Official Statistics of Japan 2018)

Financial support for IDPs will be particularly important to Okinawans because of their relative poverty compared to the rest of the Japanese population. Figure 2 shows the 2018 household income distribution for all of Japan, the Tokyo metropolis, 31 of the 32 cities designated to receive IDPs in the first month, Okinawa prefecture as a whole, and two of the

<sup>64</sup> Ishigaki City August 5 Opinion Exchange Meeting (2024).

<sup>65</sup> Ishigaki City August 2 Opinion Exchange Meeting (2024); Ishigaki City August 5 Opinion Exchange Meeting (2024); Ishigaki City August 6 Opinion Exchange Meeting (2024); *Yaeyama Mainichi Shimibun* (2025); Yonaguni Town Opinion Exchange Meeting Survey (2024).

five Sakishima island municipalities (Miyakojima city and Ishigaki city).<sup>66</sup> Annual household income in the two most populous of the five Sakishima municipalities is lower than in Okinawa prefecture, which is lower than in the 31 designated recipient cities, the Tokyo metropolis, and Japan as a whole.

An average person fleeing Okinawa has been making and saving less money over the course of their lives compared to someone from the main islands. These challenges are compounded if evacuation disrupts the IDP's income, as it will if their occupation is tied to their physical location (e.g., farmers, fishers, and anyone working in the tourism industry).

Financial and job-related support that could be offered to IDPs – funded by the government and perhaps implemented through public-private partnerships – include: housing, relocation funds (i.e., money to cover expenses related to getting settled into a new place), vocational training to acquire knowledge and skills necessary for reemployment, job search assistance, loans to start their own businesses, after-school care for children, children's cafeterias, and anti-discrimination assistance. After the 2000 Miyakejima eruption, GOJ assisted evacuees whose income fell below the minimum living expenses required for public assistance by covering the gap through a fund established by GOJ and municipal governments. Evacuees did not have to exhaust their savings or sell their property before they could receive this assistance.<sup>67</sup> A similar “Basic Income for IDPs” fund for IDPs from Okinawa could be established to help IDPs get settled into their new life as quickly as possible.

Relatedly, whether GOJ will compensate IDPs for their property is an unanswered question that has immediate implications for how likely residents are to comply with GOJ's evacuation orders and the IDP's quality of life.<sup>68</sup> Any idea of how much compensation they will receive will make it easier for residents to plan their next steps and having that compensation come immediately will decrease the chances of sinking into poverty once on the main islands. GOJ

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<sup>66</sup> The data was pulled from e-Stat, the Portal Site of Official Statistics on Japan on July 15, 2025, specifically the “Housing and Land Statistics Survey 2018 Housing and Land Statistics Survey Basic Statistics on Housing and Households Nationwide, Prefectures, Cities, Wards, Towns, and Villages” dataset. 2018 was the most recent year for which city-level household income distribution information was available. Kokonoe town in Ōita prefecture and Yonaguni town, Taketomi town, and Tarama village in the Sakishima islands were too small to show up in the dataset.

<sup>67</sup> Yamanaka and Aota (2021, p. 98-99).

<sup>68</sup> Ishigaki City August 6 Opinion Exchange Meeting (2024).

should clarify its position on compensation for destruction of property as well as loss of access to property during the displacement period. Currently, Sakishima residents are concerned that there will be no compensation “because it is a war,” as was the case after WWII. If GOJ will not offer any compensation, Sakishima residents deserve to know that too, as it may affect where they would prefer to live during a Taiwan Strait contingency.

When speaking to government officials from the five municipalities of the Sakishima islands in summer 2025, the consistent theme was that the current focus is simply getting IDPs to their designated hotels/inns on the Japanese main islands and supporting them during that first month. Life on the Japanese main islands for IDPs after that first month was beyond the scope of current planning efforts.<sup>69</sup>

However, an unintended, negative side effect of focusing on preparing for just the first month is that it biases which prefectures and municipalities are designated as recipients for IDPs. Instead of selecting receiving prefectures and municipalities based on hotel/inn capacity for a month, GOJ and the prefectural governments should decide which municipalities to send IDPs to based on the municipalities’ physical, economic, and social capacity to accommodate IDPs for months, if not years.

Simplifying assumptions can be a necessary intellectual exercise and useful tactic to break down a complex problem into smaller, more manageable steps. However, decisions about *where the IDPs are initially evacuated to should be considered together with where the IDPs will need to reside for the long-term* to minimize the stress of moving over and over again.

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<sup>69</sup> Ishigaki city municipal government official, personal communication, August 6, 2025; Miyakojima city municipal government official, personal communication, July 29, 2025; Taketomi town municipal government official, personal communication, July 30, 2025; Tarama village municipal government official, personal communication, July 30, 2025; Yonaguni town municipal government official, personal communication, August 6, 2025. The Sakishima islands face the same depopulation challenges as the rest of Japan, and this affects the municipal government’s human and fiscal resources, in other words, the municipal government’s ability to make such plans without GOJ’s leadership and assistance.

## 1.4 Actionable Insights

Analysis of existing laws, policies, contemporary news coverage, and residents' reactions as well as interviews with experts and municipal government officials has identified three major flaws with current GOJ planning. GOJ can and should address these shortcomings.

First, the Diet should pass a law to compensate voluntary self-evacuation AND/OR allow the government to order an evacuation before an “anticipated armed attack situation” is declared. This will ease the logistical challenges of evacuation and maximize Japan’s diplomatic and strategic flexibility during an international crisis. Second, it would also be useful for the Assistant Chief Cabinet Secretary in charge of crisis response and crisis management (*naikaku kanbō fukuchōkanho, jitai taisho kiki kanri tantō*), together with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) and Ministry of Defense (MOD), to involve the Taiwanese government – through the Taiwan-Japan Relations Association or the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office – and the U.S. military in evacuation planning.<sup>70</sup>

Third, the Assistant Chief Cabinet Secretary, together with MOD, should increase transparency and public trust in the planning process and evacuation by taking a clear stance on the safety of the destinations that IDPs are being sent to and *commit* to those destinations.

Fourth, the Diet should pass a law to clarify when and what, if any, compensation and financial support will be offered to support IDPs in the long-term. Fifth and finally, the Assistant Chief Cabinet Secretary should designate receiving prefectures and municipalities based on their resilience to support IDPs for the long-term. The data and reasoning used to make these decisions should be publicized to increase transparency and public trust.

It is worth noting that there is not only local concern about evacuation and post-evacuation planning but also local resistance to the securitization of the Sakishima islands, because of the fear that establishing military operations on the islands will invite Chinese attacks. The SDF established its first bases on Yonaguni island in 2016, Miyako island in 2019, and Ishigaki

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<sup>70</sup> Conversations with the Taiwanese representative could holistically cover issues related to a Taiwan Strait contingency, including Taiwanese refugees, especially those arriving on the Sakishima islands.

island in 2023.<sup>71</sup> MOD justifies these moves by arguing that strengthening Japan's defense capabilities will "lower the possibility of a military attack" on Japan.<sup>72</sup>

It is unclear whether the locals are fully convinced by this argument. Ishigaki city residents across numerous town hall meetings expressed the desire for GOJ to focus on diplomacy with China to prevent a conflict.<sup>73</sup> Tsuneo Uechi was elected mayor of Yonaguni town in August 2025 over incumbent Kenichi Itokazu with 46.5% (557 votes) to 42.2% (506 votes) of the votes.<sup>74</sup> It is a sign of local dissatisfaction – or at least that the locals have other priorities, such as addressing population decline and securing local medical care – and may add new complications to GOJ implementing its desired policy on Yonaguni island. Itokazu is an advocate of the military buildup, while Uechi understands the need for SDF deployment but takes a cautious stance on expanding defense capabilities further.<sup>75</sup>

Having examined GOJ's current draft for ways the planning can be improved to make IDPs' transition to post-evacuation life as smooth as possible, the next section examines the March 11 triple disaster case for how GOJ, prefectural, and municipal governments can prepare to support IDPs as best as possible. Though the historical March 11 triple disaster case and hypothetical Okinawa case both should have been/should be addressed as cases of IDPs, there are important differences as well. These include but are not limited to: 1) the aerial and maritime nature of evacuation (i.e., one cannot simply drive across prefectural borders), 2) the relative poverty of Okinawa compared to the rest of Japan, 3) the presence of indigenous Ryūkyūans in Okinawa, 4) the cause of initial and continued displacement – "natural or human-made disasters" versus "as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed

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<sup>71</sup> Pollmann (2026).

<sup>72</sup> *Yomuri Shimbun* (2025e). MOD is trying to ease Okinawans' burden of hosting U.S. bases to "strengthen the deterrence and response capabilities of the Japan-U.S. alliance" (*Yomuri Shimbun* 2026).

<sup>73</sup> Ishigaki City August 1 Opinion Exchange Meeting (2024); Ishigaki City August 2 Opinion Exchange Meeting (2024); Ishigaki City August 5 Opinion Exchange Meeting (2024); Ishigaki City August 6 Opinion Exchange Meeting (2024).

<sup>74</sup> Senkyo.com (n.d.).

<sup>75</sup> *Jiji* (2025c); Yamaguchi (2025).

conflict,"<sup>76</sup> and 5) the scale of IDPs.<sup>77</sup> Despite these differences, there are lessons that can be drawn from the March 11 triple disaster that would be applicable to a wide range of Taiwan Strait contingencies.

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<sup>76</sup> The nuclear nature of the Fukushima Dai-ichi accident also makes the experience of IDPs unique. For example, there were more mothers who evacuated with their children, more families were broken up over the question of evacuation, and the nuclear accident caused specific challenges around medical support, discrimination, and misinformation and disinformation. Though these are important aspects of the IDPs fleeing the nuclear accident, addressing and applying these nuclear accident-specific lessons to a Taiwan Strait contingency is beyond the scope of this report.

<sup>77</sup> The lower bound of estimated IDPs from the March 11 triple disaster is 470,000. Though current GOJ planning focuses on the 110,000 residents from Sakishima islands, the full population of Okinawa is about 1.47 million, with 90% living on the main island (Visit Okinawa Japan 2026).

## 2. Lessons Learned from the March 11 Triple Disaster

On March 11, 2011, a magnitude 9.0 earthquake – the Great East Japan Earthquake (GEJE) – struck off the coast of Japan and caused a tsunami that was 10m high on average. The tsunami triggered a meltdown at the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear plant that leaked radioactive materials into the local environment. The majority of IDPs fleeing from the triple disaster fled from Iwate and Miyagi prefectures – in response to the earthquake and tsunami – and Fukushima prefecture – in response to the nuclear accident.<sup>78</sup>

It is difficult to grasp the true magnitude of IDPs associated with the March 11 triple disaster for several reasons. First, the Nationwide Evacuee Information Exchange System was created on April 12, 2011 – one month after March 11 – and is an opt-in system, meaning IDPs have to voluntarily provide their information.<sup>79</sup> Many IDPs did not register themselves either because they did not know the system existed, they forgot to register, or they had privacy concerns.<sup>80</sup> Second, GOJ provided no legal definition of an “evacuee.”<sup>81</sup> In the case of those fleeing the nuclear accident, the status of evacuees became even more ambiguous between so-called “mandatory” evacuees, whose homes were in the twelve municipalities the government mandated evacuation from, and so-called “voluntary” evacuees, whose homes were outside government-mandated evacuation zones.<sup>82</sup>

Therefore, official numbers are likely underestimates as some IDPs never registered, especially the “voluntary” evacuees. With that caveat in mind, the Reconstruction Agency reports that over 470,000 people were evacuated from their homes following the triple disaster. As of May 2023, there were still 30,000 evacuees.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Hauer, Holloway and Oda (2020, p. 1439).

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. (p. 1444).

<sup>80</sup> Aota (2021, p. 69); Inui (2016, pp. 1851, 1853-1854).

<sup>81</sup> GOJ does not use the term IDP to describe people who fled the triple disaster. However, this report does, in line with terminology recommended by Cecilia Jimenez-Damary, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons from 2016 to 2022 (Jimenez-Damary 2023).

<sup>82</sup> Aota (2021, p. 70); Hiruta and Miyake (2020, p. 866). This definitional ambiguity is another reason this report uses IDPs, which does not draw such arbitrary distinctions.

<sup>83</sup> Reconstruction Agency (n.d.).

## 2.1 Central, Prefectural, and Municipal Government Support to IDPs

The definition of evacuees, “mandatory” and “voluntary” evacuees, was vague and never firmly established though it had important consequences: “mandatory” evacuees received more compensation from Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) than “voluntary” evacuees, and in general, it was easier to receive support as a “mandatory” evacuee and more support was available to “mandatory” evacuees.<sup>84</sup> The distinction made policy implementation more confusing as laws changed and what policy applied to who was constantly updated. In 2023, Cecilia Jimenez-Damary, UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons, argued: “All evacuees from Fukushima prefecture, whether displaced by evacuation order or fear of the nuclear disaster’s effects are IDPs with the same rights” and she “strongly recommends that discriminatory distinction between so-called ‘mandatory’ and ‘voluntary’ IDPs be completely eliminated in all administrative and legal policies and their actual implementation.”<sup>85</sup>

Under the Disaster Relief Act, municipal governments provided housing and basic livelihood support to the IDPs.<sup>86</sup> GOJ and the National Reconstruction Agency’s ambiguity over the definition of “voluntary” evacuees could help “voluntary” evacuees when municipal governments offered them support anyways, but also deterred municipal governments from offering “voluntary” evacuees support at all.<sup>87</sup>

Based on a survey of 702 municipalities, 79.9% provided support to IDPs from outside their prefecture. The 561 municipalities that provided support to IDPs varied in what requirements the individual had to meet to receive aid. 37.8% required that the individual have fled from a municipality covered by the Disaster Relief Act, strictly followed GOJ policy to restrict aid to “mandatory” evacuees.<sup>88</sup> Based on the same survey, but of 675 municipalities, 70.4% provided support to “voluntary” evacuees. In other words, somewhere between 361 and 475 municipal

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<sup>84</sup> Aota (2021, pp. 68, 70); Mosneaga (2020, pp. 576, 578); Yamanaka and Aota (2021, p. 95).

<sup>85</sup> Jimenez-Damary (2023).

<sup>86</sup> Nishikido (2022, p. 170).

<sup>87</sup> Aota (2021, p. 69).

<sup>88</sup> Inui (2016, p. 1854). The survey was sent to 1,533 municipalities – all of Japan's municipalities, excluding Iwate, Miyagi, Fukushima, and Ibaraki prefectures.

governments (at a minimum) responded flexibly to the needs of the IDPs they encountered, including “voluntary” evacuees.<sup>89</sup>

This distinction, and the confusion it caused, had the most tangible impact when it came to temporary housing. Housing support included prefabricated and wooden temporary housing constructed for IDPs and a temporary rental housing program for IDPs. GOJ helped pay for rent, security deposits, key moneys, and commissions so that IDPs could move into temporary housing.<sup>90</sup> Municipal governments also offered IDPs free public housing, priority entry for public housing, and rent support.<sup>91</sup> Many “voluntary” evacuees were able to stay afloat because of such housing support.<sup>92</sup> Though municipal flexibility over who to support usually worked in favor of “voluntary” evacuees, because of ambiguity and confusion over whether GOJ would support “voluntary” evacuees or not, whether “voluntary” evacuees received housing support or not depended on the municipal-level policies of wherever they happened to settle. This caused issues of fairness between “mandatory” and “voluntary” evacuees given the importance of housing.<sup>93</sup> This inequality plays out as differences between “mandatory” and “voluntary” evacuees within the same receiving municipality as well as “voluntary” evacuees across different receiving municipalities. In March 2017, GOJ ended the temporary housing program for those whose hometowns were designated as “safe” to return to. IDPs from these municipalities then had to decide whether to return or to settle permanently where they were without government support.<sup>94</sup>

In addition to housing support, GOJ provided: need for care certification, vaccines, children and pregnant women’s health checks, kindergartens, and elementary through middle school education.<sup>95</sup> GOJ partially or completely exempted medical and educational expenses of

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<sup>89</sup> Inui (2016, pp. 1854-1855).

<sup>90</sup> Nishikido (2022, p. 147).

<sup>91</sup> Inui (2016, p. 1856).

<sup>92</sup> Mosneaga (2020, p. 579).

<sup>93</sup> Inui (2016, pp. 1856-1857).

<sup>94</sup> Aota (2021, p. 69); Mosneaga (2020, pp. 578-579); Nishikido (2022, p. 150).

<sup>95</sup> Aota (2021, p. 69).

IDPs.<sup>96</sup> Beyond that, municipal governments were expected to do their best.<sup>97</sup> Iwaki city offered support like making medical care partly free.<sup>98</sup> There was municipality-by-municipality variation in other kinds of support, such as exemptions from water and sewage fees, distribution of donated money and everyday supplies, and support finding employment.<sup>99</sup> For how long such special treatment would be granted was also left to the municipal governments, leading to temporal variation in support for IDPs based on where they settled.<sup>100</sup>

Social support services included home visits and efforts to build community where the IDPs settled. Home visits, conducted by prefectural governments, municipal governments, NGOs, and public-private partnerships were particularly important to check in on IDPs who lived far away from other IDPs, and community-building activities were important for those who lived close to other IDPs.<sup>101</sup>

Though many municipalities offered aid, it is unclear how many IDPs received aid. Based on a February 2014 survey of 78 IDP households in Miyazaki prefecture, 65 respondents (83%) answered that they were not receiving support from municipal governments, NGOs, or local businesses.<sup>102</sup>

## 2.2 The IDP Experience

With the caveat that comprehensive data is missing, “a significant portion of IDPs from Fukushima have experienced a sharp decrease in income and continued to find themselves in difficult financial situation years after the disaster.”<sup>103</sup> Those who lived in the mandated

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<sup>96</sup> Nishikido (2022, p. 169).

<sup>97</sup> Aota (2021, p. 69).

<sup>98</sup> Hiruta and Miyake (2020, p. 864).

<sup>99</sup> Aota (2021, p. 70); Inui (2016); Nishikido (2022, p. 170).

<sup>100</sup> Nishikido (2022, p. 173); Yamanaka and Aota (2021, p. 103).

<sup>101</sup> Harada and Nishikido (2019, p. 9).

<sup>102</sup> Kawase (2015, p. 8). There are undoubtedly psychological impacts of being an IDP. However, how that played out for the March 11 triple disaster IDPs and how GOJ can address that in their civil protection planning is beyond the scope of this report.

<sup>103</sup> Mosneaga (2020, p. 578).

evacuation zones saw their pre-disaster livelihoods destroyed and are reliant on compensation payments. They face myriad challenges when applying for jobs, including locals' resentment at "taking jobs" when the IDPs could live off of compensation money. Employers were also reluctant to hire IDPs as they worried how long the IDPs would stay for, and if they were single mothers – as many Fukushima Daiichi IDPs were – then having to give them extra time off.<sup>104</sup> IDPs took jobs that were less well-paid and less secure, and many still require subsidized or public housing despite working two or three jobs.<sup>105</sup> Based on a survey of 587 IDP households in Ibaraki prefecture in September 2012, the percentage of regular workers (*seisahin*) decreased from 52.5% before March 11, 2011 to 39.8%, the percentage of self-employed decreased from 19.0% to 4.8%, and the percentage of unemployed increased from 17.7% to 46.1%.<sup>106</sup>

Tension between IDPs and the receiving communities was multi-causal, including: the perception that the influx of IDPs was raising property and rental prices; the perception that the IDPs are living "well off" on compensation money; the perception that the IDPs do not follow local rules and customs; the perception that public safety was deteriorating due to the influx of IDPs; and increased crowding at hospitals and grocery stores, as well as the general strain that the influx of IDPs put on the capacity of local services.<sup>107</sup> If the recipient city was also affected by the nuclear disaster, then differences in TEPCO compensation could also be a source of tension.<sup>108</sup>

What exactly did IDPs want in terms of support? The September 2012 survey of 587 IDP households in Ibaraki prefecture (Figure 3 adapts these results) and February 2014 survey of 86 IDP households in Miyazaki prefecture (Figure 4 adapts these results) provide the best snapshot of what IDPs actually needed.

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<sup>104</sup> Okinawa has many single-mother households. In 2023, 4.38% of households in Okinawa were single-mother households, compared to 2.30% across the nation in 2021. In 2023, 0.54% of households in Okinawa were single-father households, compared to 0.29% across the nation in 2021 (Okinawa Prefecture Department of Children's Welfare 2025, p. 5).

<sup>105</sup> Mosneaga (2020, pp. 578-579); Yamanaka and Aota (2021, p. 96).

<sup>106</sup> Haraguchi (2013, p. 68).

<sup>107</sup> Hiruta and Miyake (2020, p. 867); Kikuchi and Takaki (2015); Mosneaga (2020, pp. 576, 578-579).

<sup>108</sup> Fujibayashi and Nakayama (2017, pp. 3-4); Kikuchi and Takaki (2015); Mosneaga (2020, pp. 576, 581).

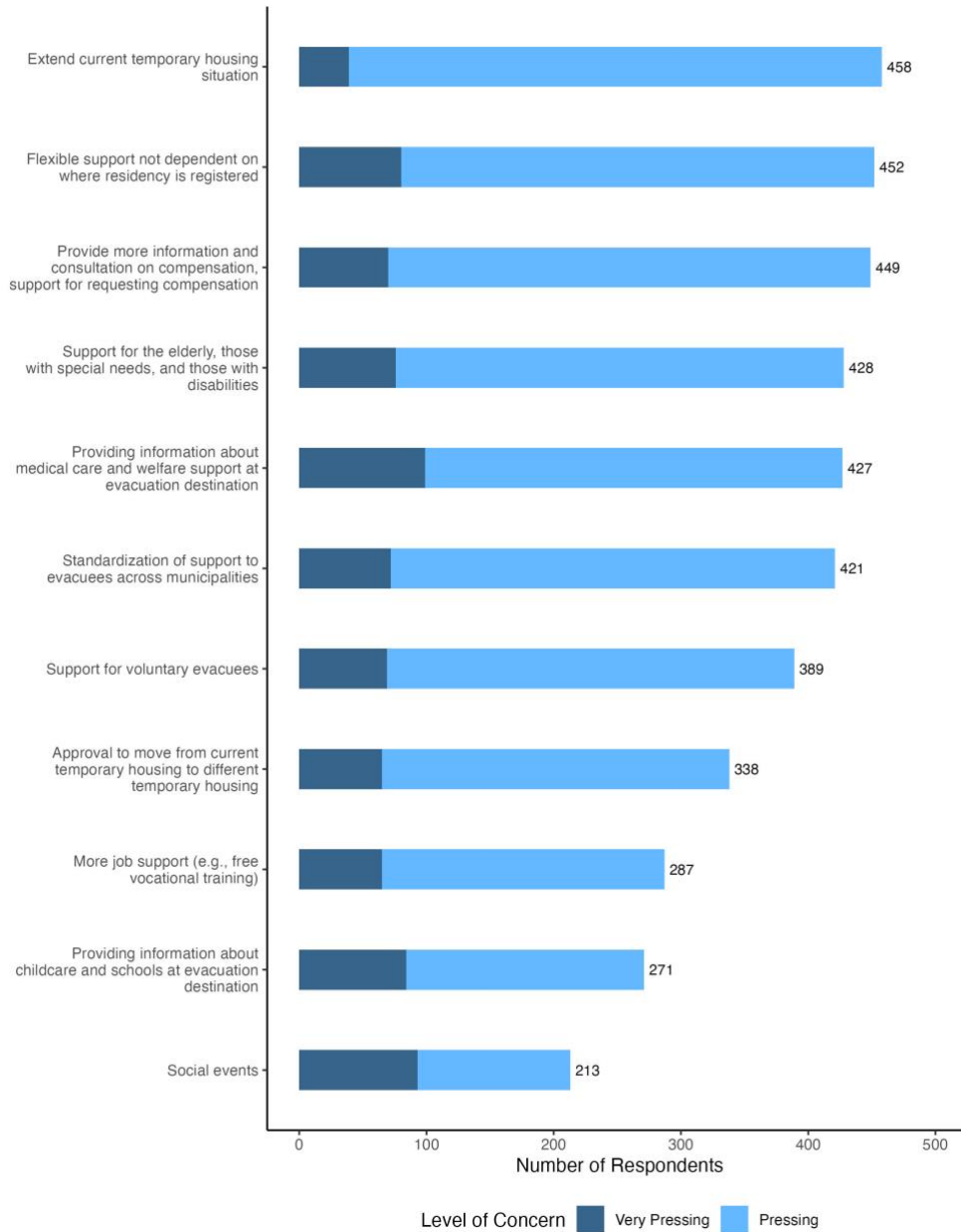


Figure 2: Concerns Held by IDP Households in Ibaraki Prefecture, n=587, September 2012 (Source: Haraguchi 2013, p. 74) <sup>109</sup>

<sup>109</sup> Haraguchi (2013, p. 74). Concerns that are specific to the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear accident IDPs either due to geography, health, or other unique circumstances were not included from the original figure.

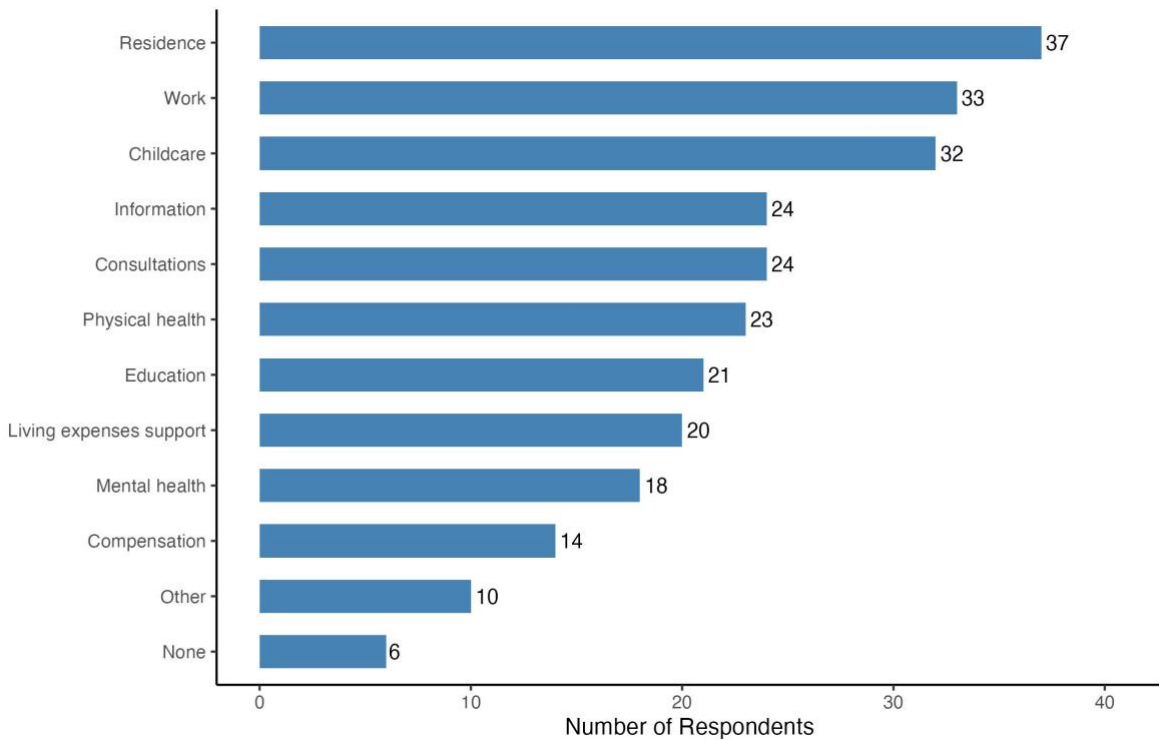


Figure 3: Issues that IDP Households would like government/NGO/business support for in Miyazaki Prefecture, n=86, February 2014 (Source: Kawase 2015, p. 9)<sup>110</sup>

Though the two surveys do not word the answers the same way, housing is still the top concern one to three years after March 11. 78% of Ibaraki survey respondents that it was a “very pressing” or “pressing” concern and 43% of Miyazaki survey respondents that they would like government/NGO/business support in this regard.

Getting information was also a notable challenge. 17% of Ibaraki survey respondents answered that getting information about medical care and welfare support at the evacuation destination was a “very pressing” concern and 14% answered that getting information about childcare and schools was a “very pressing” concern. 28% of Miyazaki survey respondents answered that they would like government/NGO/business support to get more information about livelihood support. In other words, simply getting accurate and timely information about what support is available to IDPs continued to be a challenge one to three years after March 11.

<sup>110</sup> Kawase (2015, p. 9). Concerns that are specific to the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear accident IDPs either due to geography, health, or other unique circumstances were not included from the original table.

Though Sakishima municipal governments clarified that they were not yet planning for beyond the first month of evacuation, when pressed, their list of concerns about post-evacuation life closely mirrors the concerns of March 11 triple disaster IDPs. This includes: maintaining communities, lifestyles, interpersonal relationships, and local culture; receiving information about life on the main islands (since many of them do not have family and support networks, it may be important to live close to each other in the beginning); fostering mutual understanding between IDPs and the receiving community; childcare, early childhood education, and schooling; employment support; housing support; care for the elderly, the disabled, and chronically ill.<sup>111</sup> These concerns are also echoed by Sakishima residents themselves.<sup>112</sup>

### 2.3 Lessons Learned

There are two meta-lessons from the March 11 triple disaster that shape every other aspect of the government's response to a potential IDP crisis.

First, "The longer the time that IDPs end up spending in limbo, the greater the variety of socio-economic marginalization challenges that subsequently emerge. These challenges are far more difficult, and costly, to resolve in the longer term, than the investment of time and resources required to properly listen to and design policies that are flexible enough to be responsive to the actual needs of affected people early on."<sup>113</sup> Support for IDPs was not as robust as it could have been because both GOJ and receiving municipal governments treated their evacuation as "temporary."<sup>114</sup> At every level – central, prefectural, and municipal – governments should tackle IDPs from a Taiwan Strait contingency as a long-term challenge from the beginning.

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<sup>111</sup> Ishigaki city municipal government official, personal communication, August 6, 2025; Miyakojima city municipal government official, personal communication, July 29, 2025; Taketomi town municipal government official, personal communication, July 30, 2025; Tarama village municipal government official, personal communication, July 30, 2025; Yonaguni town municipal government official, personal communication, August 6, 2025.

<sup>112</sup> *Yaeyama Mainichi Shimbun* (2025); Yonaguni Town Opinion Exchange Meeting Survey (2024).

<sup>113</sup> Mosneaga (2020, p. 582).

<sup>114</sup> Yamanaka and Aota (2021, p. 93).

Second, following the March 11 triple disaster, GOJ drew arbitrary distinctions of who could receive what kind of support based on criteria tied to where the IDP lived at the time of the triple disaster, i.e., whether the IDP lived within the government-mandated evacuation zone or not. This was never relevant to assessing any given *individual's* needs, and as more time passed, becomes less and less relevant.<sup>115</sup> Offering different levels of support based on such criteria caused economic inequality and social tensions among the different groups of IDPs.<sup>116</sup> It is important that GOJ does not draw policy distinctions between IDPs based on when they evacuated (e.g., before or after an official evacuation order is issued), where they evacuated from (e.g., the Okinawa main island or the remote islands), or any other criteria. The 1959 Temporary Measures for Displaced Coal Miners is a model for offering support that is better tailored to individual needs.<sup>117</sup> Everyone who has “been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence” in Okinawa, “in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict” should be treated the same – based on individual’s needs – to standardize support across municipalities and ensure that IDPs do not have advantages or disadvantages depending on the policies of whichever municipality they fled or were evacuated to.

There are five lessons from the experiences of the March 11 triple disaster IDPs that are relevant for potential IDPs from a Taiwan Strait contingency. GOJ should (1) direct prefectural and municipal governments to provide long-term housing as soon as possible, and (2) establish an automatic, *opt-out* registration system for IDPs. Prefectural and municipal governments should (3) begin collaboration with relevant NGOs, and (4) plan for government reorganization to tackle siloed governance (*tatewari gyōsei*). And finally, GOJ, prefectural, and municipal governments should (5) prepare to combat the misinformation and disinformation likely to proliferate during the evacuation and subsequent displacement period.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Aota (2021, p. 72).

<sup>116</sup> Aota (2021, p. 67); Mosneaga (2020, pp. 578-579).

<sup>117</sup> Yamanaka and Aota (2021, p. 99).

<sup>118</sup> MOD will also play a role in combatting disinformation (Ministry of Defense 2025, pp. 254-255).

### 2.3.1 Long-Term Housing

As the survey results indicate, the most pressing needs for March 11 IDPs were housing and information. Current GOJ guidelines should be commended for trying to minimize the time IDPs spend in a collective evacuation shelter and hotels/inns. But what comes next is still very opaque.

In their published guidelines, three of the eight designated receiving prefectures – Kagoshima, Miyazaki, and Yamaguchi – do not even discuss what comes after the initial month.<sup>119</sup> Two of the eight – Kumamoto and Nagasaki – acknowledge that long-term housing needs to be planned for and that they will plan for it in 2025.<sup>120</sup> Saga prefecture acknowledges that IDPs will eventually need to be moved to private rental housing, vacant rooms in public housing, or long-term evacuation housing (i.e., wooden houses or prefabricated houses) but this is explicitly not dealt with in current planning.<sup>121</sup> Ōita prefecture is the only prefecture that acknowledges public housing may need to be provided from the very beginning of evacuation because there is not enough inn/hotel capacity. But they have not yet planned for how to use public housing (or other forms of housing) to offer long-term housing beyond plugging the gaps in the initial month.<sup>122</sup>

Fukuoka prefecture does not plan for what comes after the initial month, but does offer a guide as to what is the prefecture's responsibility and what is the municipalities' responsibility: both the prefecture and the municipality are responsible for acquiring and preparing vacant rooms in public housing facilities; the prefecture is responsible for coordinating with groups to secure private rental housing but the municipalities are responsible for the contracts for private rental housing; it is the municipality's responsibility to secure municipal land to build long-term evacuation housing on, but both the municipality and prefecture's responsibility to build long-term evacuation housing; and it is the

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<sup>119</sup> Kagoshima Prefecture (n.d.); Miyazaki Prefecture (2025); Yamaguchi Prefecture (n.d.).

<sup>120</sup> Kumamoto Prefecture (2025, p. 8); Nagasaki Prefecture (2025, p. 6). Note that 2025 means fiscal year 2025, so the latest the prefectures can announce their plans and meet this deadline is March 31, 2026. Kumamoto Prefecture specifically notes that securing long-term housing is something they need to do if evacuation lasts for longer than six months.

<sup>121</sup> Saga Prefecture (n.d., p. 5).

<sup>122</sup> Ōita Prefecture (n.d., p. 33).

prefecture's responsibility to secure prefectural land and build long-term evacuation housing on prefectural land.<sup>123</sup> This offers a useful preview of how layered, complex, and confusing the provision of long-term housing can potentially be – and varied in quality and quantity across prefectures and municipalities.

Prefectures are already aware that they eventually need to plan for IDPs staying for longer than a month. However, GOJ should more thoroughly debate the possibility of moving IDPs straight into long-term housing (instead of into hotels/inns initially) and direct receiving prefectures and municipalities to explore this possibility. This could minimize the number of times IDPs have to move. In the case of Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear accident, the two-and-a-half year delay in determining who would provide housing meant that IDPs had to delay rebuilding their lives for two-and-a-half years.<sup>124</sup> Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear accident IDPs moved an average of 4.6 times in the first five years.<sup>125</sup>

### 2.3.2 Automatic, Opt-Out Registration

A national database of IDPs is critical to communicate information about support policies to IDPs, including about livelihood support (medical care, childcare, etc.), and conduct representative surveys assessing IDPs' evolving needs over time. In order to facilitate better two-way communication with IDPs, GOJ should adopt an automatic registration system for IDPs. If there are privacy considerations, then the system should allow for IDPs to opt-out instead of requiring IDPs to opt-in. In 2011, it took GOJ a month to set up a registration system for IDPs. Meanwhile, Aichi prefecture – because they had experience with registering evacuees during the evacuation of Miyakejima – began to collect IDPs information and created the Aichi Prefecture Disaster Victim Registration System before the national system. Aichi prefecture operated their system in conjunction with the national system.<sup>126</sup> Currently, GOJ plans to register residents as they evacuate on the day of. As Ishigaki residents noted, it would be more efficient to register in advance of evacuation.<sup>127</sup> GOJ should explore this possibility.

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<sup>123</sup> Fukuoka Prefecture (n.d., p. 13).

<sup>124</sup> Takagi (2025).

<sup>125</sup> Mosneaga (2020, p. 580).

<sup>126</sup> Harada (2022, p. 93).

<sup>127</sup> Ishigaki City August 27 Opinion Exchange Meeting (2024).

### 2.3.3 Government-NGO Collaboration

There are some services that only governments can provide. However, given the diversity of needs that IDPs have, NGOs also have a critical role to play.<sup>128</sup> Local NGOs can work with individuals to develop a tailored life recovery plan and provide personalized support, connecting them to the government, community leaders, specialists (lawyers, architects, financial planners, etc.), and volunteers as needed.<sup>129</sup> NGOs can “engage in more flexible support activities by sharing information on problematic aspects of evacuee support, learning from each other, and applying know-how accumulated prior to the disaster.” NGOs can both provide “spontaneous” support and deliver tailored support services that the government contracts them to.<sup>130</sup> NGOs can also transcend distinctions like what GOJ drew between “mandatory” and “voluntary” evacuees.<sup>131</sup>

Some prefectures and municipalities that received IDPs from the March 11 triple disaster had more robust relationships with relevant NGOs than others. At the municipal level, municipal governments that had established relations with NGOs as part of their daily operations were more effective in supporting IDPs.<sup>132</sup> This is also true at the prefectural level. Saitama prefecture had the weakest preexisting relationships with NGOs because it does not have a history of natural disasters and therefore, a relatively weak disaster culture.<sup>133</sup>

In contrast, because they had a history of natural disasters, NGOs in Aichi prefecture were involved in disaster preparation from normal times and played a critical role in working with the government to provide IDP support.<sup>134</sup> After the Great Hanshin Earthquake, the Rescue Stockyard (RSY) was established. After the Tokai Flood Disaster, the “Aichi-Nagoya Flood Volunteer Headquarters” was established within the Aichi prefectural government but run by RSY and other volunteer groups. Aichi prefecture formulated the Aichi Collaboration

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<sup>128</sup> Harada and Nishikido (2016); Nishikido (2022).

<sup>129</sup> Aota (2021, p. 72); Nishikido (2022, p. 132); Yamanaka and Aota (2021, p. 105).

<sup>130</sup> Nishikido (2022).

<sup>131</sup> Aota (2021, p. 72).

<sup>132</sup> Nishikido (2022, p. 166).

<sup>133</sup> Ibid. (p. 184).

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

Rulebook in 2004 as guidelines for the prefectural government to cooperate with NGOs, and holds a “Practitioners’ Conference on NPO-Government Collaboration” annually since 2005. Aichi prefecture formulated the Procedures for Developing a Collaboration Roadmap in 2009, and the Aichi Prefecture Volunteer Network for Disaster Prevention was renamed to focus on GEJE. Aichi Prefectural Disaster Victims Support Center was created within the prefectural government but run by NGOs.<sup>135</sup>

Niigata prefecture also has natural disaster experiences: the 2004 Chūetsu earthquake, the 2007 Chūetsu earthquake, as well as torrential rainfalls and snowfalls. Because of these experiences, Niigata municipal governments, NGOs, and even private citizens have relevant experience. In Niigata, private citizens helped set up NGOs to meet the IDPs’ needs, and IDPs themselves were empowered to set up NGOs.<sup>136</sup>

Prefectures and municipalities that have been designated as recipients for IDPs should begin establishing relationships with NGOs in preparation for such a crisis – especially if they do not have a history of natural disasters that has equipped them with relevant experiences. Central, prefectural, and municipal governments should see NGOs as partners in decision-making, as they bring knowledge and expertise to the table, not merely implementors of the government’s policy. An annual government-NGO conference may be a particularly fruitful way for government and NGO staff to make connections with each other and begin practical cooperation.

Beginning collaboration with NGOs now will also allow municipal governments to identify which NGOs are the best partners. Municipalities from Fukushima, Miyagi, and Iwate prefectures began running reconstruction support groups. The success of these support groups was shaped, in part, by the effectiveness of the intermediary group running the program. Saitama Social Welfare Council (contracted by Namie Town, Tomioka Town, and Fukushima Prefecture) was generally more effective than the RCF (contracted by Futaba Town and Okuma Town). The Saitama Social Welfare Council had relevant experience because they sponsored the Fukutama meetings,<sup>137</sup> and based on that experience, they conducted home visits and held events at “Saitama salon.” RCF was a general incorporated

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<sup>135</sup> Harada (2022, pp. 92-94).

<sup>136</sup> Matsui (2013).

<sup>137</sup> “Fukutama” is a mashup of Fukushima prefecture and Saitama prefecture.

association that supported venture companies. They supported reconstruction efforts in tsunami-affected areas, such as in Iwate prefecture, and had experience supporting IDPs clustered close together. However, they did not have relevant experience for dealing with more scattered IDPs.<sup>138</sup> NGOs were ineffective when their prior experience was irrelevant and/or they tried to reproduce what they had done in the past in a different context.<sup>139</sup> In other words, it is not sufficient to partner with NGOs; it is important that the NGO partner has the relevant experience and know-how to deal with this particular kind of situation.<sup>140</sup>

Though NGOs are important partners in delivering tailored and multi-dimensional support, there is one potential, negative dynamic. Because NGOs in Saitama were bottom-up and shut out of the prefectural government, groups like Fukutama Center could lobby for what the IDPs needed – such as compiling accurate numbers and increasing housing. Meanwhile, NGOs in Aichi were so embedded with the government that they were sometimes constrained. For example, the content of the NGO's newsletter had to be approved by the prefectural government and rice could not be given directly to some IDPs after the grants were shifted to being funded by the national Reconstruction Agency.<sup>141</sup> While NGOs with relevant experience should quickly work with prefectural and municipal governments, it would be beneficial for IDPs to also have an NGO that is not beholden to the prefectural and municipal governments.

#### 2.3.4 Government Reorganization

NGOs play an important role in IDP support. However, it still falls on the government to coordinate and manage logistics, protocols, and procedures across all government offices and NGOs.<sup>142</sup> Within the receiving prefectural and municipal governments, there must be a section responsible for directing and coordinating IDP support across the government and with NGOs.

At the prefectural level, Aichi prefecture was the most effective at playing this mediating role. The Aichi prefectural government established a cross-departmental “Disaster Victim

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<sup>138</sup> Harada and Nishikido (2019, pp. 5-6, 8-9).

<sup>139</sup> Harada and Nishikido (2016, p. 132).

<sup>140</sup> Harada and Nishikido (2019, p. 9).

<sup>141</sup> Harada and Nishikido (2016, p. 97).

<sup>142</sup> Ibid. (pp. 133-134, 180).

Reception Measures Project Team”; hosted annual meetings since 2011 for municipal disaster victim reception staff, local support centers, and NGOs to exchange information; and contracted with NGOs to run the Aichi Prefectural Disaster Victims Support Center located within the prefectural office.<sup>143</sup> Niigata prefecture also was relatively effective, as they established sections and departments to provide evacuee support given their experience with natural disasters.<sup>144</sup>

When the prefectural government does not play a coordination role, NGOs can help break down siloed government, as was the case in Ibaraki prefecture.<sup>145</sup> However, it is more likely that support for IDPs is less adaptive when prefectural governments do not play this role. The Saitama prefectural government lacked experience working with NGOs and saw dealing with IDPs as an extension of their regular duties. No new prefectural government section was created to support IDPs, and the prefecture did not coordinate with the NGOs. The Saitama Prefecture Disaster Response Headquarter was set up separately from - not in coordination with - the Volunteer Station, and Saitama Prefecture’s Crisis Management and Disaster Prevention Section’s refusal to participate in the Fukutama meetings meant that - with no clear leader - Fukutama Meetings became a venue for NGOs to report their activities rather than to coordinate support for IDPs. The prefectural government arranged prefectural housing through the Housing Division, but it was not until December 2018 that Saitama Prefecture formed the Saitama Prefecture Disaster Volunteer Network with the prefectural government and the prefectural social welfare council at its core. The absence of government leadership led to redundancy, duplication, confusion, and inadequate management across the government and NGOs in Saitama prefecture.<sup>146</sup>

Within Saitama prefecture, municipalities provided the most effective support to IDPs where (1) the mayors were involved or (2) a general affair-type section or a section under the direct control of the mayor was established or existed.<sup>147</sup> When mayors take a personal interest, they can provide aid flexibly. For example, the mayor of Sayama city announced that the city

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<sup>143</sup> Harada (2022, pp. 93-94).

<sup>144</sup> Nishikido (2022, p. 184).

<sup>145</sup> Harada and Nishikido (2016, p. 132).

<sup>146</sup> Harada (2022, pp. 90-92); Nishikido (2022, pp. 168-169, 178-179).

<sup>147</sup> Nishikido (2022, pp. 143-144, 162).

would take in 100 IDP households and provided 50,000 yen per month of rent for six months as well as the security deposit and key money.<sup>148</sup> If the mayor is less personally invested, then support for IDPs falls to other sections of the government, usually, the municipal government's disaster response section. However, these sections usually do not have the cross-cutting authority and perspective required to be effective as they are focused on crisis management and not how to support IDPs from outside the municipality.

To be effective, municipal governments need to create a department or section focused on IDP support. There are many ways to reorganize the government so that designated section can "coordinate the activities of multiple departments within the government."<sup>149</sup> In Koshigaya city, the Mayor's Office and the Public Information Section took over from the crisis management department; in Misato city, the Security Promotion Section within the Planning and Administration Division within the Resident Services Department took the lead to integrate crisis management with human services; in Sugito town, the section responsible for evacuee support was moved from the Policy Section to the Resident Participation Promotion Section; and in Higashimatsuyama city, the Community Development Section within the Community Life Department was the coordinated with NGOs.<sup>150</sup>

Based on a survey of 79 municipalities in Ibaraki, Tochigi, and Miyagi prefectures, 29 municipalities (37%) established a new, specialized government body to deal with the nuclear crisis, e.g., radiation countermeasure office, nuclear accident response office, crisis management office, and/or contaminated waste disposal department. 35 municipalities (47%) dealt with the nuclear crisis through existing government bodies, e.g., Life Environment Division, Health and Welfare Division, Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Division, and General Affairs Division.<sup>151</sup> Though more municipalities did not reorganize than did, "the relatively large number of municipalities that were reorganized suggests that the nuclear accident required a multi-dimensional and continuous government response."<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Nishikido (2022, p. 165).

<sup>150</sup> Nishikido (2022, pp. 165-166).

<sup>151</sup> Shigihara (2023, p. 74).

<sup>152</sup> Ibid. (p. 73).

Prefectures and municipalities that are designated to receive a large number of IDPs should either plan to stand up a new section dedicated to IDP support when IDPs start arriving - with a clear plan of which other sections the personnel will be pulled from - or to rearrange existing structures so that the designated section has relevant expertise (i.e., human services) and authority across the different government sections that need to be involved in providing support to IDPs. The priority is to have an organization that serves “as a mediator in process management that can determine the role and function of the missions of multiple support organizations and thus coordinate these in order to meet the shared goal of supporting evacuees.”<sup>153</sup> Such organizational decisions should be made in advance of the crisis because “the response [by recipient governments] were delayed in cases where it was unclear which section or department was responsible for taking initiative.”<sup>154</sup>

### 2.3.5 Combatting Disinformation and Misinformation

Disinformation - including disinformation spread by foreign parties and third-party organizations - and misinformation could complicate evacuation (e.g., claims about meeting times and locations for evacuations, claims about the safety of the evacuation routes, claims about the imminence of an armed attack), deter IDPs from receiving benefits that they are entitled to (e.g., claims that a certain benefit requires giving up their residence registration in Okinawa when it does not), and poison relations between IDPs and the communities that accept them (e.g., claims that the IDPs are rude or impolite or violent, claims that the IDPs are receiving benefits they are not entitled to, claims that the IDPs are “playing pachinko all day”).

In times of emergency, including natural disasters and wars, well-intentioned actors accidentally spread misinformation and malign actors deliberately spread disinformation. In Japan’s history, this includes after the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake, during WWII, and after the 1995 Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake.<sup>155</sup> After the March 11 triple disaster, there were rumors of foreign crimes, sex crimes, and looting as well as disinformation about politicians on Twitter, Facebook, and social media.<sup>156</sup> Kesennuma city in Miyagi prefecture established

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<sup>153</sup> Nishikido (2022, p. 183).

<sup>154</sup> Ibid. (pp. 181-182).

<sup>155</sup> Hayashi (2023).

<sup>156</sup> Ibid. (pp. 221-222).

the Kesenuma City Disaster Information System in 2013 and demonstrated the importance of using every communication platform possible – including disaster prevention radio, area mail, Emergency Rapid Mail, Kesenuma Disaster FM, webpage, and Twitter (now X) – in one system. The Iwate Prefectural Office also used Twitter (now X), their own website, and public web destinations. Social media was an important tool to get information out quickly.<sup>157</sup>

The best way to handle disinformation and misinformation is to promptly provide accurate information. However, given the difficulty balancing speed and accuracy, this is an issue that GOJ can start debating internally now. Supporting IDPs is just one of many reasons to increase societal resilience against disinformation and misinformation. GOJ may need to consider legislation “to collectively set minimum standards of necessary content moderation by digital platforms.”<sup>158</sup> GOJ already has social media accounts for disseminating natural disaster-related information, such as the Cabinet Office’s Disaster Management’s @CAO\_BOUSAI on X, and Japan Meteorological Agency’s @JMA\_bousai also on X. Government agencies at the national, prefectural, and municipal levels could consider creating social media channels on X, LINE, and Facebook specifically dedicated to disseminating IDP-related policies to IDPs over the long-term. IDP support policies should be made public from even before a Taiwan Strait contingency begins. In other words, GOJ can “prebunk” rumors that might spread about IDP support policies.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid. (pp. 222-223).

<sup>158</sup> For more on content moderation in Japan, see Kawasaki (2024).

<sup>159</sup> For more on prebunking in Japan, see Kuwahara (2025).

### 3. Conclusion

Given that “Japan’s security environment is as severe and complex as it has ever been since the end of World War II,”<sup>160</sup> Japan is taking prudent steps to protect its citizens. This report critiques the current draft for requiring the declaration of an “anticipated armed attack situation,” lacking transparency and commitment, and planning for the short-term. This report also reviewed the March 11 triple disaster IDP experiences and drew lessons that should inform future planning: all levels of government should work together to provide long-term housing as soon as possible, establish an automatic, opt-out registration system, collaborate with NGOs, reorganize as needed to deal with this multi-faceted challenge, and combat disinformation and misinformation.

Though this report focused on how GOJ can do better, breaking down a complex problem like this into its component, chronological parts is a useful strategy, and the current planning guidelines gets some parts right. It highlights the importance of keeping communities together and addresses vulnerable populations’ special needs. Recipient prefectural and municipal governments have begun the difficult work of systematically preparing to receive IDPs on the basis of these guidelines.

Yet there are three ways in which this piecemeal strategy can backfire. First, simplifying assumptions that are used early in plan developments are not revised to become more realistic over time. Planning assumptions must become more realistic, as quickly as possible. For example, the inter-governmental training exercise in 2026 can assume that all hotel/inn rooms will be available in the receiving prefectures. However, the next time the training exercise is conducted, they should assume that only half the hotel/inn rooms will be available and so forth. Second, decisions that make sense in the short-term are not revisited later when it becomes clear – as planning for the later stages of evacuation proceeds – that they have negative downstream effects. For example, moving IDPs into hotels/inns initially might make sense when planning for only the first month, but as the government plans for later stages of the evacuation, it might become clear that it is better to move as many IDPs as possible directly into long-term housing. At that point, the initial decision to move IDPs into hotels/inns should be revisited. Third and finally, using simplifying assumptions and focusing

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<sup>160</sup> Ministry of Defense (2022a, p. 2).

exclusively on the “early stages” can undermine the public’s trust in evacuation plans if the assumptions are seen as too naive or the decisions as not conducive to long-term evacuation.

For all of these reasons, GOJ needs to strike a better balance between (a) simplifying the problem and focusing on the “early stages” of evacuation in order to make the complex problem tractable and (b) showing that they are aware of how complex the problem is and that they understand that displacement will be a long-term challenge for the IDPs. If GOJ errs too far on the side of making the problem tractable for themselves, they could fail to convince citizens to trust their planning at all. The best evacuation plan is not the most tightly-choreographed one, but the one that citizens believe is credible.

## 4. Discussion

All of these lessons are relevant for the Dutch government and the governments of European Union (EU) member states. Like Japan, the Netherlands and EU member states must also prepare for natural or human-made disasters as well as actual or potential armed conflict: whether that is an invasion of an EU member state, climate change-related impacts that make previously habitable parts of Europe no longer habitable,<sup>161</sup> or other natural disasters.

This report surfaced several questions that the Dutch government and Dutch civil society could begin addressing in anticipation of a future IDP crisis:

- Is the Dutch government conceptualizing of IDPs as a short-term challenge or long-term challenge?
- How can the Dutch government, alone or together with civil society and businesses, provide long-term housing for IDPs as quickly as possible?
- How can the Dutch government (and/or NGOs) identify and track IDPs to enhance two-way communication with IDPs during the period of displacement?
- How can the Dutch government partner with municipalities and NGOs on the issue of IDPs?
- How can the Dutch government, from the central to municipal levels, reorganize itself to better address the multi-faceted challenge that IDPs will pose?
- How can the Dutch government, civil society, and businesses increase societal resilience to disinformation and misinformation, both generally and specifically with regards to IDP policies and challenges?

Addressing these questions proactively will help alleviate the humanitarian suffering of IDPs during the displacement period, and – by enhancing the credibility of civil protection – preserve the state’s strategic options and increase the state’s ability to deter threats.

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<sup>161</sup> O’Leary (2019).

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