Ring of Fire earthquakes hit Japan, New Zealand

EARTHQUAKES IN THE SO-CALLED RING OF FIRE AROUND THE PACIFIC OCEAN HAVE CAUSED DEVASTATION IN JAPAN AND NEW ZEALAND. STEVE HOLDEN REPORTS.

The massive 8.9 magnitude earthquake that hit the Pacific Ocean off the north-east of Japan on Friday 11 March, creating a devastating tsunami, has caused a soaring death toll on Japan's north-east coast. According to the United States Geological Survey, the earthquake was the biggest to strike Japan and the seventh biggest ever.

The devastation was compounded by fires and explosions in the earthquake damaged number-four reactor at the Fukushima No.1 plant, 250 kilometres northeast of Tokyo.

An estimated 550,000 people have been displaced; according to Save the Children an estimated 100,000 of them are children. The earthquake and tsunami struck in mid-afternoon when students were still in school. Stephen McDonald, the man leading Save the Children's team in Japan, said he expected to find many children who have been separated from their families.

School building standards and safety procedures in Japanese schools meant many students and staff were safe from the earthquake, but not the ensuing tsunami that swept inland for 10 kilometres, destroying property and killing many people.

Aerial footage in the wake of the tsunami showed military helicopters lifting survivors from rooftops and partially submerged buildings. Survivors painted a large white SOS and a helicopter landing symbol in the grounds of Shizugawa High School in Minamisanriku, Miyagi, northern Japan.

Students and teachers at the Sydney Japanese School observed a minute's silence on the Monday after the disaster. In a statement posted on the school's website, Deputy Principal Allan Meadows said, 'Our school community is directly affected, with many teachers, families and friends past and present coming from the devastated regions of eastern Japan. We are extremely anxious about our friends' safety.'

In New Zealand, meanwhile, many schools reopened in March after a 6.3-magnitude earthquake devastated the Christchurch region on 22 February.

Of 163 primary and secondary schools affected by the earthquake, 90 were able to reopen in February, while 24 had reports indicating further assessment for structural damage was required. A further 11 seriously damaged schools remained closed.
The revamped My School website of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) went live last month, providing financial information on all schools and students’ literacy and numeracy achievement as measured by the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy.

The aim of the revamp, according to ACARA Chair Professor Barry McGaw, in a statement on the My School website, is to provide information on individual schools and to enable comparisons of students’ performances in literacy and numeracy across schools. ‘These comparisons provide information to support improvements in schools,’ McGaw explains in the statement. ‘Among schools with similar students, those achieving higher student performances can stimulate others to lift expectations of what they and their students can achieve.’

The initial reaction focused on the hot topic of school funding. Anna Patty, writing in the Sydney Morning Herald, set the cat among the pigeons, writing that, ‘Some Catholic schools on Sydney’s north shore are getting more government funding than public schools serving poorer communities in the western suburbs, according to the My School website.’

Independent Education Union of Australia Federal Secretary Chris Watt cried foul. ‘Why wasn’t the question asked as to how those same northern suburbs Catholic schools compared to neighbouring government schools?’ he asked. ‘The simple answer is that location counts and the key driver of costs in schools is salaries…. There is a much greater concentration, in both Catholic system schools and government schools, of experienced teachers on higher salaries in the northern suburbs than in the western suburbs.’

Executive Director of the Catholic Education Office Sydney Dr Dan White pointed out that Catholic systemic schools receive substantially less total combined funding from state and Commonwealth governments than do state schools. ‘Even when school fees for systemic Catholic schools are added to the funding provided by both governments, the total amount of funding per student is still less than for state schools,’ he said.

Trevor Cobbold, National Convenor of the Save Our Schools state school lobby said problems remain with the My School website, but added, ‘The school financial data strengthens the case for change in the funding of government and private schools. It exposes the massive resource advantage of elite private schools over highly disadvantaged government schools. Yet, the elite schools continue to get large government grants and want even more.’