

## 'The ground started to move like a wave'

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Saiichi Kawai is not entirely sure which came first, the earthquake early warning alarm buzzing on his mobile phone or the first rippling movement of the tremor itself.

"My mobile went 'brr, brr' and at about the same time the ground started to move like a wave," Mr Kawai says.

Then the old four-story wooden company building that was used by the drinks company Mr Kawai worked for started to rattle and shake, making a terrible noise.

Like most around it in the coastal town of Rikuzentakata, the building was able to ride out the most powerful quake in Japan's recorded history.

But the troubles of the town, the building and Mr Kawai were just beginning. In a roadside interview just two days after the tremor, the fork-lift truck driver recalled how after the shaking stopped he went to check on his daughter on higher ground in the town nestled between sea and hills in Japan's north-eastern Iwate prefecture.

Perhaps half an hour later, Mr Kawai was heading back to work when he caught sight of the earthquake's deadly child, a ferocious tsunami that he estimates as two metres higher than the seven-metre sea walls built to protect Rikuzentakata from Pacific swells. Breaching the town's defences, the water tore through its buildings, reducing homes to splinters and scouring the more substantial steel and concrete structures in its path.



Saiichi Kawai's home town of Rikuzentakata was flattened

"I saw houses swept along by the wave . . . I don't remember what sound it made, maybe I was too agitated to notice," says Mr Kawai, who has lived in Rikuzentakata all his 58 years.

"I was so agitated that it seemed as if it had smoke coming off the water . . . maybe it was really spray, but at the time I wondered why the water was smoking."

In its turbid wake, the tsunami left a flattened town and a citizenry whose collective and individual lives had been turned upside down.

Among the countless inanimate casualties was that old wooden building still used by Mr Kawai's company, which makes Japan's traditional tipplers, sake – a kind of rice beer – and shochu, a distilled spirit. The big tanks that the company used to store sake were gone, scattered around the debris of the town. And a handful of the businesses' 50 or so employees still seem to be missing, Mr Kawai says.

His house, built a mere 20 metres from the sea, was erased by the water. Along with other residents, Mr Kawai and his family were suddenly living in shelters and dependent on the somewhat meagre rations distributed to disaster survivors.

"This is all I have; my clothes and my car," he says. "I've been wearing the same socks for three days."

Yet Mr Kawai appears unbowed by the ruin of his town and by an uncertain future. He even manages to smile and chuckle with journalists come to harvest the tsunami's rich crop of drama and misery. Asked how it is that he can still manage to laugh, he laughs again.

"I'm laughing because there is nothing I can do but laugh," he says.

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