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National Post editorial board: Why Japan, 2011 isn't Haiti, 2010

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Just 14 months ago, several hundred thousand Haitians were killed in a massive earthquake — perhaps as much as 3% of Haiti's population. Between 10% and 20% of the nation was rendered homeless.

The Sendai earthquake and tsunami that struck eastern Japan on Friday will produce a death toll that likely will be an order of magnitude lower. Thanks to the wealth, technological sophistication and foresight of post-war Japanese society, untold tens of thousands of lives have been saved.

Japan's emergency-response system kicked into action the very second that shock waves originated off the coast of the Oshika peninsula on Friday: An earthquake early-warning system, connected to hundreds of seismometers around the country, broadcast bulletins on the country's television stations. In the mere minute or so it took the seismic waves to travel to the country's major population centers, millions of Japanese already were executing their well-rehearsed earthquake-response procedures.

The fact that the vast majority of buildings withstood the earthquake, even in the country's worst-affected areas, is tribute to the advanced building codes and materials that the country has adopted in recent decades. Unlike in Haiti (2010), Pakistan (2005) or Sichuan (2008), the rolls of the dead were not needlessly extended by acres of ramshackle tenements that collapsed immediately upon the heads of their occupants.

Even the country's nuclear installations may come out of the earthquake without generating any large-scale radiation calamity. A dramatic explosion at the Fukushima I facility blew away the installation's outer structure — yet the reactor itself, though having suffered a partial meltdown, apparently remains intact. Thanks to redundant safeguards and Japan's large staff of world-leading nuclear technicians and scientists, a full-scale Chernobyl scenario likely will be avoided. (Opponents of nuclear technology will use Japan's crisis to illustrate the perils of nuclear technology — but more people die every year in coal-mining accidents than likely will suffer from the damage caused to Japan by this extraordinary once-a-century event.)

Technology cannot save everyone: Thousands of Japanese citizens were swept away in the 10-meter high waves that hit shore in and around Sendai — a tragedy that no electronic network or construction technique can fully prevent. Yet the fact that Japan, 2011 is a far cry from Haiti, 2010 shows that the toll wrought by nature's most horrible tragedies can be massively reduced when societies amass the wealth and political will to prepare for the worst.

It is to the credit of Japan's leaders — and their predecessors — that this is exactly what they did in the years leading up to the 2011 Sendai earthquake.

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