

March 11th was a day that affected a lot of people I cared about, but it took me a while for everything to sink in and realize that it was part of my life too. On March 11th 2011, I was taking a shower in my dormitory in Saitama. I can't quite remember if I had classes that day or I simply chose to skip them because I was exhausted from work. It was the middle of the day and I was going about my business when I suddenly found that I couldn't stand up properly. My thought process was something to the effect of: "Wow, am I hungover?? I knew all this drinking was going to catch up with my health at some point, but this is... oh... this is an Earthquake." So I rinsed off the shampoo off my head, wrapped a towel around my waist and ran up to my room. I put on some shorts and then my next priority was to secure my things and make sure nothing would be broken. It took me a second to realize that I'd be a bit broke if I didn't get downstairs. I ran outside, putting on a shirt as I greeted everyone standing outside.

Our area wasn't affected all that badly, so it wasn't until later that I heard about people dodging falling debris and having to walk 8 hours back home due to traffic jams and stopped trains. It was much much worse than I had first realized. I still remember me joking with my friend Vincent when hearing that the Fukushima plant had been damaged, saying that "Oh looks like we're gonna have a new Marvel hero on our hands." Our friend Aki quickly cut in to let us know that it was a very serious situation and not something to be joking about. He was right, it is still something that we can't say is completely safe, even 3 years later.

*The interesting thing about my story is my 'battle', if you will, with my university at the time. I would like to say beforehand that I do owe a lot to my university and all the professors that have gotten me to where I want to be and I don't have any hard feelings toward the administration. Though it was troubling for me at the time, I understand their concerns and know they had a right to try and take action as they did.*

Myself and other friends who were in Japan on the same program received a message on March 11th checking in to make sure we were all okay. We received another email the next day double checking our safety and recommending that we register with the U.S. State Department's website as a precaution. Then, about five days later, we received further instructions to register with International SOS and to update our contact information. The same day, we received another message saying:

*...I write to inform you that the University's International Oversight Committee (IOC) has recently classified all of Japan as a Category 2 (high risk) region according to the Restricted Regions List. In particular, the prefecture of Iwate and all areas northeast of Tokyo are areas of heightened concern. This means that all students must now petition to the IOC to travel to Japan for any University-related activity. All students, faculty, and staff must defer their travel to Japan until authorization has been obtained through the IOC.*

*While students currently in Japan are not required to evacuate at this time, you must obtain approval from the IOC to stay in Japan for the remainder of your studies.*

So, with that we had to submit a document to receive permission to continue staying in Japan. It was right around this time that a bunch of my friends in the same program as I from different universities were being told to evacuate the country immediately with threats that their program would be cancelled without counting any of the credits if they did not comply.

Several people evacuated of their own accord- it was a very chaotic situation.

There were headlines in the papers talking about “*Foreigners evacuating the country en masse*”. As someone who was used to the frequent power outage causing hurricanes in Texas, I was sitting in my room thinking “*Is everyone nuts? I still have internet.*” Once I got this message asking us to submit a document, I started to get very nervous that I would be forced to leave Japan.

So, those of us from my university still in Japan filled out the paper, detailing our personal information, the steps we took to secure our safety, our understanding of the risks of being in Japan and submitted it to our program supervisor. I was under the impression that the general reaction to the situation at Fukushima at the time was blown way out of proportion.



*Fox New mistook a Shibuya dance club for a nuclear power plant*

So, I did what anyone stuck in their dorm eating bowls of rice, mayonnaise and soy sauce would do - I scoured the internet finding ways to dispel their concerns. Attached is the document I wrote regarding the situation in Fukushima at the time. I sent this to my supervisor along with the following message:

*I just finished filling out the petition. Inside the petition I mentioned an attachment which I've included in this email.*

*I have provided sources for all claims made within the document and encourage those who may be reading it to contact me asap if there are any inconsistencies or unclear portions. I would also like to encourage anyone evaluating the situation in Japan to read it (or anyone interested in the situation in Japan).*

Several days later on the 31st of March, I received the following letter:

*Thank you for your recent request to continue your studies in Japan. As you are very aware, the country of Japan has undergone severe damage and devastation due to the March 11th. While it is clear that the Japanese government is responding quickly to this crisis, it is the top priority of the International Oversight Committee (IOC) to account for the health, safety, and security of all our students abroad. This country is currently on the Restricted Regions List and is considered an area that poses significant health, safety, or security risks to foreign travelers. The policy of the University states that travel by faculty, staff, or students to countries currently on the University Restricted Regions List is not allowed unless an exception is granted by the IOC.*

*Your request to the IOC indicated your intent to continue your study abroad program in Tokyo, Japan for the Spring 2011 session. This location is currently deemed an area of high risk by the IOC. There is a high degree of uncertainty surrounding the situation at the disabled Fukushima nuclear plant and the indeterminate health risks associated with long-term exposure to the radiation emitted from that facility. Possible resource shortages (including food, water, and fuel) and the damaged infrastructure throughout Japan are additional concerns, especially as Japan faces continued aftershocks which may cause the situation to deteriorate further. Furthermore, after consultation with faculty experts who have intimate knowledge of Japan and significant expertise in nuclear plant safety and radiation, the committee finds the unpredictable levels of radiation and unknown long-term health risks to residents of Tokyo extremely concerning.*

*After considerable review, it has been determined that the health, safety, and security risks associated with travel to Tokyo create an unacceptable level of risk for students at this time. Therefore, this request has been denied an exception to the current travel suspension.*

This response got me pretty fired up as I felt that it was clear that my awesome word file had been disregarded. I was also quite irked at the fact that I was being told there was limited food whereas I could walk down to the grocery store and get pretty much anything I wanted. I sent the below message in response. I think I remember sending a picture of the huge stock of food at the grocery store as well.

*Thank you for the response. I did some extensive research on the effects of radiation and sent a long report concerning this along with my petition. I recently asked a professor of the Department of Nuclear Engineering and Radiological Sciences at the University of Michigan to look over this report and he concluded that my conclusions were accurate. I have an updated version of the document containing Mr. <censored>'s quote. I am currently under the impression*

*that your office didn't take the time to read this report I created even though I requested this to be read along with my petition. I will be happy to send you another document explaining how the risks that the IOC has suggested exist can be very safely mitigated. (Concerning possible aftershocks, food/water shortages and issues with radiation contamination)*

*On further consideration, I intend to appeal your office's decision, should it stand. If there exists a standing appeals process, please let me know. If no protocol exists, I will suggest that the matter be presented to the University Ombudsman's office.*

I was very determined to stay in Japan despite these notifications. I had a couple back and forths with my contact at the University. I received a note understanding how disappointed and distraught I must have been, but that the decision was final. I responded by claiming that our individual cases had not been properly considered, as well as some other remarks such as: “ *It would appear that the petition process was designed not in the interest of giving students a voice in the decision-making process, but instead to add the appearance of legitimacy and thoroughness to your office's decision.*”

To make a long story short: What the situation was boiling down to, despite my several contacts with multiple staffs and back and forths with people at the IOC, was that University simply was not going to budge as long as the US Department of State continued to list Tokyo as a danger area. At that point, I really was not sure what to do, but my plan was to stall as much as I could without getting myself kicked out of the University. Then, on April 14th when I was looking at plane tickets back to the United states, I received the following message from the US embassy in Tokyo.

*JAPAN*

*April 14, 2011*

*This Travel Alert replaces the Travel Warning for Japan dated March 31, 2011. This Travel Alert expires on June 15, 2011.*

*The assessment of technical and subject matter experts across United States Government agencies is that while the situation at the Fukushima Daiichi plant remains serious and dynamic, the health and safety risks to areas beyond the 50 mile evacuation zone, and particularly to Tokyo, Nagoya (Aichi Prefecture), Yokohama (Kanagawa Prefecture) nearby U.S. military facilities and the prefectures of Akita, Aomori, Chiba, Gunma, Iwate, Nagano, Niigata, Saitama, Shizuoka, Tochigi, and Yamanashi, and those portions of Fukushima, Ibaraki, Miyagi and Yamagata prefectures which are outside a 50 mile radius of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant are low and do not pose significant risks to U.S. citizens.*

*This analysis takes into consideration both various age groups and the classification of the severity of the situation at Fukushima Daiichi as a Level 7 event by the Government of Japan, which reflects what has transpired since the initial incident and the potential long-term effects in the area surrounding the plant.*

*This assessment reflects inputs from our national laboratories as well as the unanimous opinion of the U.S. scientific experts on the ground in Japan. Furthermore, they are consistent with*

*practices that would be taken in the United States in such a situation. Based on the much reduced rate of heat generation in the reactor fuel after one month of cooling and the corresponding decay of short-lived radioactive isotopes, even in the event of an unexpected disruption at the Fukushima Daiichi plant, harmful exposures to people beyond the 50 mile evacuation zone are highly unlikely, and there would be a significant amount of time to best assess any steps that might have to be taken.*

*The situation at the plant is dramatically different today than it was on March 16, when we saw significant ongoing releases of radioactivity, the loss of effective means to cool the reactor cores and spent fuel, the absence of outside power or fresh water supply for emergency management, and considerable uncertainty about the condition of the site. Today, while the situation remains serious, and there is still a possibility of unanticipated developments, cooling efforts are ongoing and successful, power, water supply, and back-up services have been partially or fully restored, and planning has begun to control radioactive contamination and mitigate future dangers. Our coordination with the Japanese is regular and productive, and we have a greatly increased capacity to measure and analyze risks.*

*The Department of State has lifted Voluntary Authorized Departure, allowing dependents of the U.S. government employees to return to Japan.*

*We continue to recommend that U.S. citizens avoid travel within the 50-mile radius of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Plant. U.S. citizens who are still within this radius should evacuate or shelter in place.*

Had this come in a few days later, I probably would have been back in Texas wondering when I'd ever be able to get back to Japan. The effects of the earthquake are still being experienced in the affected regions in Tokyo and it is something that has changed many lives. While I know I referred to it as a 'battle' between myself and the University, I am glad to have had so many people supporting me with my efforts during that time and I am glad that the administration was patient enough to politely deal with me rather than issuing an ultimatum right off the bat. My favorite part about this story is that, just a month and a half or so after being told that it was imperative that I evacuate Japan, I submitted my request to have my study abroad program extended for another semester.