It is just before midnight on a Friday in Tokyo. Among the neon lights and skyscrapers of the Shinjuku district, the city's commercial centre, salarymen are tumbling out of bars following end-of-the-week drinks, and dressed-up teenagers are teetering in heels in front of the station. Nearby, a very different weekend ritual is unfolding – one that is becoming increasingly familiar. A long, neat queue of people is forming in a dimly lit underground car-park. They are waiting for a seat on one of the overnight buses heading up to the north-east of the country.

Life in Japan has not been the same since March 11, when a magnitude-9 earthquake rattled the country to its core, triggering not only a devastating tsunami but also the world's most serious nuclear crisis in decades. About 25,000 people died.

Three months on, life in Tokyo appears to have returned to normal but the disaster, played out in vivid detail via television, newspapers and the internet, has had an enormous effect on the collective psyche. The crisis has brought Japanese people

'IT SEEMED POINTLESS TO BE WORKING AS AN ACTOR. I CAN'T HELP BY GOING ON STAGE, SO I PACKED MY BAGS'

together in ways not seen since the end of the Second World War, and unprecedented numbers of city-dwellers of all ages and backgrounds – salarymen, young professionals, students, housewives – are giving up their weekends to help.

Such is the scale of the clean-up that during the Golden Week national holidays in late May many trips abroad were cancelled or postponed (bookings to Hawaii, a popular destination, slumped by 28 per cent) and instead thousands headed to the north-east, where inundated relief organisations had to turn volunteers away. About 390,000 Japanese have so far volunteered in the worst hit regions, helping in any way they can.

In Tokyo's Friday-night bus queue, the volunteers are laden with tents, wellington boots, rucksacks, vast quantities of instant noodles, and enough bottled water to last several days. The destination for many is Ishinomaki. Once famous for its fish market, picturesque coastline and manga museum, the small town (population 165,000) in

MUDBUSTERS ON A MISSION

Thousands from Tokyo are giving up their holidays and weekends to clean up Japan's tsunami-stricken towns. **Danielle Demetriou** watches volunteers at work in the wreckage of Ishinomaki. Photographs by **Keith Ng**

The tsunami demolished half of Ishinomaki, in north-east Japan, leaving about 6,000 dead

Miyagi prefecture was one of the worst affected. The tsunami left a trail of destruction across nearly half of its streets, demolishing countless pretty low-rise wooden houses and generations-old businesses. At one school, Okawa Elementary, 74 of the 108 pupils died. The final death toll for the town is believed to be about 6,000.

At eight o'clock the following morning, in eye-blinkingly bright sunshine, two pink buses carrying 180 volunteers arrive at Ishinomaki's aid base at Senshu University. Here, in front of a rose-coloured campus building with blossoming sakura cherry trees, there is a sea of tents, tidy rows of portable lavatories and a number of rubbish recycling areas. In one corner, volunteers dressed in tracksuits are doing their morning exercises, stretching and jumping in time to a recording of old-fashioned music – a popular national routine. Looking pale and nervous, the new arrivals are organised into six-man teams by members of the NGO Peace Boat.

One of 140-plus NGOs operating in the area, Peace Boat is among the most prolific: every week since March 11 it has marshalled between 100 and 250 volunteers, delivering 1,000 hot meals a day to the homeless and clearing mud and rubbish from damaged properties. Every evening, a representative from each NGO attends a meeting at the university where they painstakingly list on a blackboard what their volunteers have achieved that day in an attempt to coordinate their efforts.

For the new volunteers, the first step is to set up what will be their canvas home for the week before the real work begins. One of the groups – Team 17 – is a mix of strangers aged between 21 and 41. They include a nurse, a stage director, a video-game programmer, an actor and a couple of students. None has done anything like this. Laying down his bags, Jin Horiuchi, 42, a stage director from Tokyo, says, 'I haven't volunteered before, but recent events left me thinking about Japan and its future. Where is this country going? I hope our being here will create something positive out of the darkness.'

Airi Tanaka, 21, a university graduate from Yokohama, opens her suitcase on the grass, revealing a bottle of powdered shampoo wedged alongside a giant cabbage, pouches of pre-cooked curry and a polka-dot raincoat. 'I've been feeling really sad since March 11,' she says. 'I realised the only way I'd feel better is if I come to help. I'm not sure what to expect, but I don't mind getting dirty.'

Surveying the new arrivals from under a tree is Sohbi Iida, 38, a magazine editor from Tokyo who is about to return home after spending the past week here with her husband. 'This time last year we were in Egypt on our honeymoon,' she says. 'This year it's a bit different. Like everyone, I'd seen all those horrible images: people losing their families, entire buildings washed away. I couldn't just stay at home and watch TV. The hardest thing to get used to is the smell. It's dark, pungent, and smells of the sea. And, of course, there is still the possibility of finding bodies.'

It is time for Team 17 to set to work. They slip awkwardly into waterproof trousers and jackets, helmets, goggles, face masks, gloves and rubber boots, and attach name tags to their arms. They board an old local bus along with some of the other teams, and travel along a familiar tableau of destruction: mounds of roadside debris, battered homes, smashed cars and chewed-up pavements.

In the central Chuo district the bus pulls up at a junction – traffic lights are still not working – and in silence the volunteers pile off and head to Peace Boat's makeshift on-site HQ, an outdoor concrete space between buildings. They sit cross-legged on the ground as the NGO staff brief them using a loudspeaker: today's mission is to clear up the remnants of the all-pervading tsunami sludge from a narrow street that was home to many of the town's bars and restaurants. The briefing is functional and practical, highlighting which colour rubbish bags to use for each type of rubbish and how to use the tools provided. Luckily for these volunteers an initial clean-up has taken place in the area, so there is little chance of finding human remains.

The first task is to clean a restaurant that was left filled with mud and rubble as the waters drained. As with many of the properties in the area, the

owner contacted Peace Boat directly to ask for help. A row of red and white Kirin beer lanterns and a sign advertising tofu steak for ¥400 hang outside the wooden building, which somehow resisted collapse in the disaster – although these are among the few items not to have been swept away.

The interior is caked with sludge, and traditional paper walls are strewn across what was once a rock garden. A waterline just below the ceiling marks the tsunami's peak. Standing at the doorway, the volunteers appear hesitant, fiddling with each other's goggles and masks to make sure they are perfectly positioned before they head inside. Despite her mask, Tanaka crinkles her nose. 'I've heard about this smell. It hits you immediately. It's strong,' she says. 'And fishy.'

Some of them work together to remove the larger items, such as a cigarette vending machine and wooden lockers for the shoes that customers once slipped off at the entrance. Others monotonously scoop mud into sacks.

Similar scenes are being replicated along the street. A group of young men are cleaning up a bar, while three women stand knee-deep in a drain, shovelling thick, black sludge into bags. On one corner of the street is a more hopeful image: Moriya Fruits is the first shop in this part of town to have reopened since the tsunami, thanks to the volunteer clean-up operation. It is an oasis of near-normality among the chaos – next to it stands a devastated onigiri rice shop; opposite, the shredded remains of a ryokan, a traditional Japanese inn.

'THE HARDEST THING TO GET USED TO IS THE SMELL. IT'S DARK, PUNGENT, AND SMELLS OF THE SEA. AND, OF COURSE, THERE IS STILL THE POSSIBILITY OF FINDING BODIES'

The refrigerators and storage are still out of use so the shop's owner, Akira Moriya, 52, has to collect fresh produce from across the region at least every other day. He sells it to the growing number of locals who are moving back into the undamaged upper levels of their homes.

As I enter his shop, which has stood on this site for eight decades, Moriya points to a brown horizontal line by the ceiling. 'This is how high the tsunami rose,' he says. 'We were here when the earthquake hit, but I escaped to a mountainside temple with my family before the water arrived. Three people died in this street – the elderly couldn't move fast enough. Three bodies from further away were also washed up here.

'We are amazed to see so many people from outside. We are all very thankful. But we are very surprised – we don't normally get many visitors.'

Opposite rubbish piles up in the central Chuo district. **Below left** office worker Masayuki Ichigo shovels dried-up sludge. **Below right** volunteers do their morning exercises. **Bottom right** Paolo Fukichi, a photographer on a three-week volunteering stint

Across town, a team of volunteer 'mud-busters' from another NGO – JEN – is tackling one of the worst-hit areas, Watanoha, a low-lying residential district reduced to row after row of destroyed homes. Mountains of wreckage line the deserted streets, offering clues to life here before the tragedy: a child's pink plimsoll, a credit card, a ripped school photograph, a still-ticking clock, a sports trophy. There is a buzz of activity, however, inside the home of 69-year-old Shiro Chiba, where volunteers, armed with shovels, bags and wheelbarrows, are cleaning sludge from between the wooden floor joists.

'When I heard that the tsunami was coming, I climbed this,' Chiba says, pointing to a telegraph pole near his garden. 'I stayed up there for six hours.' With that, he rushes to fetch green tea and riceballs to feed the volunteers – among them Masayuki Ichigo, 39, dressed in a striking bandanna, who has made a 12-hour bus journey from Aichi prefecture to be here. Ichigo laughs when asked how the clean-up work compares with his normal routine. 'It's completely different,' he says. 'I work in an office, in the quality-control department of a car production company. This is exhausting, but satisfying. The government

can't do everything, it's such a big job. So we need to help, too.'

Ishinomaki – like countless areas across the north-east – needs all the help it can get. It is estimated that the total cost of the clean-up could reach £184 billion and may take up to three years. The most crucial decision facing rural communities is whether to rebuild at all. With many towns and villages suffering from dwindling, ageing populations (a problem replicated across rural Japan), there are some communities that may simply not be repaired owing to a lack of financial viability.

A short drive away, we reach farmland. Here, among beautiful and incongruous blossoming trees, thick sludge covers rice paddies and vegetable fields. The high salt content of the mud means that many farmers may not be able to use their land for several years. The landscape is dotted with washed-up cars; many of them are marked with a single pink ribbon, fastened to the bodywork and fluttering in the breeze – each ribbon signifies the discovery of a body.

It is lunchtime for JEN volunteers, who have spent the morning cleaning sludge from fields. They gather in a barn owned by a retired farmer. Chitoshi Kameyama, whose home now faces demolition, chats cheerily as he distributes instant noodles, sausages and juice. He asks the volunteers to sign an old boiler suit for him, as a souvenir.

Paolo Fukichi, a 38-year-old photographer from Tokyo who is nearing the end of a three-week volunteering stint, says, 'I first came up a few days after the tsunami, for work. The scale of the devastation was shocking. I decided it would be more useful to volunteer than to take photographs. One of the biggest challenges is building relationships with locals, who aren't used to outsiders. But we're making progress. This is our fourth day with Kameyama-san and he offered us lunch today for the first time.'

Right Akira Moriya in front of his store, Moriya Fruits, the first shop to open in the Chuo area, thanks to the volunteer effort. **Middle** volunteers camp out among the cherry trees in the grounds of Senshu University. **Far right** a representative from the NGO Peace Boat greets the new arrivals at the volunteer camp

Several hours later, back at the campsite, it is rest-time for the exhausted members of Team 17. Laughter and chatter fill the air as the volunteers, huddled around gas stoves, prepare dinner, sharing their supplies with new friends. Mari Okabe, a 28-year-old nurse from Tokyo, explains why she came to Ishinomaki: 'I'm originally from Niigata, where there was a big earthquake in 2007. At the time, I was working in Tokyo and couldn't help, but I felt really guilty. This time, I didn't want to miss out so I started looking into volunteering work straight away.'

For others in the team, it has been a case of shifting priorities. Koji Seki, 32, an actor from Saitama who is dressed in a woolly hat and anorak, says, 'On March 12 I decided to volunteer. It suddenly seemed pointless to be working as an

'IT'S A REFLECTION OF THE JAPANESE SPIRIT OF HELPING ONE ANOTHER. WE HAVE A LONG HISTORY OF MUTUAL SUPPORT'

actor while all this was happening. I can't help Japan by going on stage, so I packed my bags and came here instead.'

Inside the main university building, the day is far from over: here, several classrooms have become the offices of Ishinomaki's Disaster Volunteer Centre, comprising 40-plus staff, which coordinates recovery operations across the region, alongside a team monitoring the efforts of the NGOs. The centre's director is Hideo Otsuki, who has spent decades working for local government and welfare organisations in Ishinomaki. Wearing a mint-green workman's suit, and with large glasses hiding his tired eyes, he sits at his desk flicking efficiently through a pile of folders. 'We've cleaned up 5,000 houses, but the city still needs 10,000 new housing units, with 9,600 people currently in evacuation centres,' he says. 'The scale of the disaster was beyond the imagination, and this is the first time we've had to develop a disaster volunteer centre here.' As of early May, Otsuki explains, about 31,000 volunteers – predominantly Japanese but a number from overseas – had made the clean-up pilgrimage to Ishinomaki.

He has been surprised by the numbers. 'I see it as a reflection of the Japanese spirit of helping one another,' he says. 'We have a long history of mutual support in the community.' He explains that, unlike in other nations, there is no strong church presence among Japan's volunteer groups, but there is an intense secular sense of togetherness, which he believes comes to the fore in times of national crisis. 'This sense has decayed over recent decades,' he says. 'But I hope this disaster can be a trigger to revive such feelings, particularly among the younger generation.'

Like so many in Ishinomaki, Otsuki suffered greatly in the tsunami. 'My house was washed away,' he says quietly. 'Four members of my family passed away. Most people in my office were also affected.' The thing that gives him hope, he says, is that people still wish to live in Ishinomaki, and that the volunteers are helping to make that wish a reality. 'Ishinomaki will never be the same again,' he says, 'but it can and will be rebuilt.' ■