

[Letter from Fukushima: A Vietnamese-Japanese Police Officer's Account](#)



[New America Media](#), First Person, Ha Minh Thanh, Posted: Mar 19, 2011

***Editor's note:** This letter, written by a Vietnamese immigrant working in Fukushima as a policeman to a friend in Vietnam, has been circulating on Facebook among the Vietnamese diaspora. It is an extraordinary testimony to the strength and dignity of the Japanese spirit, and an interesting slice of life near the epicenter of Japan's current crisis, the Fukushima nuclear power plant. It was translated by NAM editor, Andrew Lam, author of [East Eats West: Writing in Two Hemispheres](#). His first book, [Perfume Dreams, Reflections on the Vietnamese Diaspora](#) won a 2006 Pen Award.*

Brother,

How are you and your family? These last few days, everything was in chaos. When I close my eyes, I see dead bodies. When I open my eyes, I also see dead bodies. Each one of us must work 20 hours a day, yet I wish there were 48 hours in the day, so that we could continue helping and rescuing folks.

We are without water and electricity, and food rations are near zero. We barely manage to move refugees before there are new orders to move them elsewhere.

I am currently in Fukushima, about 25 kilometers away from the nuclear power plant. I have so much to tell you that if I could write it all down, it would surely turn into a novel about human relationships and behaviors during times of crisis.

The other day I ran into a Vietnamese-American. His name is Toan. He is an engineer working at the Fukushima 1 nuclear plant, and he was wounded right at the beginning, when the earthquake struck. With the chaos that ensued, no one helped him communicate with his family. When I ran into him I contacted the US embassy, and I

have to admit that I admire the Americans' swift action: They sent a helicopter immediately to the hospital and took him to their military base.

But the foreign students from Vietnam are not so lucky. I still haven't received news of them. If there were exact names and addresses of where they work and so on, it would be easier to discover their fate. In Japan, the police do not keep accurate residential information the way they do in Vietnam, and privacy law here makes it even more difficult to find.

I met a Japanese woman who was working with seven Vietnamese women, all here as foreign students. Their work place is only 3 kilometers from the ocean and she said that they don't really understand Japanese. When she fled, the students followed her, but when she checked back they were gone. Now she doesn't know if they managed to survive. She remembers one woman's name: Nguyen thi Huyen (or Hien).

No representatives from the Vietnamese embassy have shown up, even though on the Vietnamese Internet news sites they claim to be very concerned about Vietnamese citizens in Japan - all of it a lie.

Even us policemen are going hungry and thirsty, so can you imagine what those Vietnamese foreign students are going through? The worst things here right now are the cold, the hunger and thirst, the lack of water and electricity.

People here remain calm - their sense of dignity and proper behavior are very good - so things aren't as bad as they could be. But given another week, I can't guarantee that things won't get to a point where we can no longer provide proper protection and order. They are humans after all, and when hunger and thirst override dignity, well, they will do whatever they have to do. The government is trying to provide air supply, bringing in food and medicine, but it's like dropping a little salt into the ocean.

Brother, there are so many stories I want to tell you - so many, that I don't know how to write them all. But there was a really moving incident. It involves a little Japanese boy who taught an adult like me a lesson on how to behave like a human being:

Last night, I was sent to a little grammar school to help a charity organization distribute food to the refugees. It was a long line that snaked this way and that and I saw a little boy around 9 years old. He was wearing a t-shirt and a pair of shorts.

It was getting very cold and the boy was at the very end of the line. I was worried that by the time his turn came there wouldn't be any food left. So I spoke to him.

He said he was in the middle of PE at school when the earthquake happened. His father worked nearby and was driving to the school. The boy was on the third floor balcony when he saw the tsunami sweep his father's car away. I asked him about his mother. He said his house is right by the beach and that his mother and little sister probably didn't make it. He turned his head and wiped his tears when I asked about his relatives.

The boy was shivering so I took off my police jacket and put it on him. That's when my bag of food ration fell out. I picked it up and gave it to him. "When it comes to

your turn, they might run out of food. So here's my portion. I already ate. Why don't you eat it."

The boy took my food and bowed. I thought he would eat it right away, but he didn't. He took the bag of food, went up to where the line ended and put it where all the food was waiting to be distributed. I was shocked. I asked him why he didn't eat it and instead added it to the food pile ...

He answered: "Because I see a lot more people hungrier than I am. If I put it there, then they will distribute the food equally."

When I heard that I turned away so that people wouldn't see me cry. It was so moving -- a powerful lesson on sacrifice and giving. Who knew a 9-year-old in third grade could teach me a lesson on how to be a human being at a time of such great suffering? A society that can produce a 9-year-old who understands the concept of sacrifice for the greater good must be a great society, a great people.

It reminds me of a phrase that I once learned in school, a capitalist theory from the old man, Fuwa [Tetsuzo], chairman of the Japanese Communist Party: "If Marx comes back to life, he will have to add a phrase to his book, Capital, and that 'Communist ideology is only successful in Japan.'"

Well, a few lines to send you and your family my warm wishes. The hours of my shift have begun again.

- Ha Minh Thanh