

What should teachers prioritise to save the life of their pupils in case of hazards? : Verification of the Sendai District Court's judgment of the Okawa Elementary School case

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The devastating tsunami just after the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake on 11th March 2011 killed the 74 children and 10 teachers of Okawa Elementary School (hereafter “the School”). The parents of the deceased children claimed against the Ishinomaki City and the Miyagi Prefecture concerning the death of their children. On 26th October 2016 the judge of Sendai District Court sentenced the Ishinomaki City and the Miyagi Prefecture to a compensation for the damage. The judgement said that the teachers was supposed to have foreseen the tsunami attack and was responsible for leading the children to the safe place. The author got the full text of the sentence of the Sendai District Court judgement and verified the claims by both the complainant and the defendant at the judgement in order to consider the protection against disasters at schools in the future.

The following is the review of the facts in time series.

At 0246pm, the earthquake occurred. NHK immediately after the earthquake started to announce that and to appeal of taking refuge from the expected tsunami damage.

At 0251pm, NHK reported that the expected maximum tsunami height was 6m.

At 0314pm, the Meteorological Agency of Japan reported that more than 10m tsunami height should be expected in Miyagi Prefecture.

Around 0320pm, an announcement by Kahoku Fire Station to evacuate the expected tsunami reached the school.

Around 0330-0335pm, the teachers and the children began to move towards “the Triangle Zone” from the playground of “the School” .

Around 0337pm, the teachers and children were swallowed by the tsunami which flew beyond the bank of the Kitakami River.

At 0337pm, the tsunami reached the school and the circumference was wholly flooded.

Finally the judgement concluded that “the Triangle Zone” is not appropriate for evacuation against the tsunami and that the teachers should lead the children to the high hill just behind the School. The judgement also said that evacuation towards the hill should be mostly prioritised to save the lives of the children although a landslide due to the aftershocks were expected.

According to the press report, both the complainant and the defendant was dissatisfied over the judgement and appealed to the high court. However, this judgment suggests the essence of the disaster prevention at schools: to save the life of the pupils should be mostly prioritised over than the maintenance of the order as the school on the occasion of the emergency situation. Teachers should make much effort in understanding the natural disasters, collecting information of the environment around their school, disaster preparedness, as much as conducting periodic emergency drills.

Keywords: the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake, tsunami preparedness, disaster prevention