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On March 14, just three days after the Great East Japan Earthquake, Tokyo Electric Power Company, Inc., (TEPCO 東京電力) announced implementation of rolling blackouts in East Japan due to expected power shortages.¹

According to TEPCO’s plans, approximately three hours of blackout were planned for a wide Tokyo metropolitan area, including Kanagawa, Shizuoka, Yamanashi, Chiba, Ibaraki, Saitama, Tochigi, and Gunma prefectures. However, because the amount of electricity consumption was not completely predictable, the rolling blackout plan was only a notification of what may happen. In fact, as it turned out, the plan was not always implemented as previously scheduled.

To alleviate power shortage, various actors offered temporary solutions. Manufacturing companies temporarily organized weekday holidays as a replacement for the usual weekend holidays.² Railway timetables were adjusted to reduce the daytime service.³ Department stores and retail chains reduced their store lighting and business hours.⁴ Signs reading “blackouts now” and “saving electricity” could be observed everywhere in Tokyo. Thus, in a quiet but highly noticeable way, rolling blackouts brought changes to the everyday life in Tokyo and people soon began to adapt to these changes.

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RESEARCH ON KUNITACHI’S LOCAL SHOPPING STREETS

Our research group is based in Kunitachi, which is located to the west of the Tokyo Metropolitan area. The city is a residential area of Tokyo’s upper-middle class and home to universities and beautiful greenery. A number of local stores have created a unique street scene at the JR Kunitachi station. The city’s current residential population is 74,612, with 35,416 of households (as of August 2012).5

The first rolling blackout in Kunitachi occurred on March 16. At the university, a “Weekly Electricity Forecast” board was placed in front of the campus entrance, and the whole university was quiet and rather dim, even during the day. Near JR Kunitachi station, people and cars moved slowly as traffic lights were switched off, and they had to follow the instructions of a police officer instead. These scenes indicate that the daily life of people in every corner of Kunitachi was considerably dependent on infrastructures such as electricity.

To collect data on changes, we conducted a questionnaire survey from mid-November through December 2011 at three major local shopping streets around the south side of JR Kunitachi station: Fujimi-Dori, Asahi-Dori, and Daigaku-Dori. It was part of the “Methods of Social Survey” class. Each student made 3 or 4 questions that reflect their interests about the local shopping street and the change after disaster, and Takashi Machimura (the charge of the “Methods of Social Survey” class) assembled them into one questionnaire. Store owners or managers answered with face-to-face interviews. The target group included approximately 156 stores, and 86 of them responded (55.1% response rate).

Eighteen questionnaire items were divided into the following seven parts: The impact of rolling blackouts, Support for victims, Changes after the nuclear accident, “Mood of self-restraint” and changes in sales, save electricity campaigns, the future of local shopping streets, and Relationship between university and local shopping streets. Because this study addresses changes and impacts on local shopping streets due to the disaster, we will mainly use questions on rolling blackout and changes after the disaster.

RESEARCH FINDINGS: CHANGES IN EVERYDAY LIFE IN SUBURBAN TOKYO

1) Various Reactions to Rolling Blackouts

In TEPCO’s original rolling blackout plans, Kunitachi belonged to Groups 2, 3, and 4. A wide area of the city, including our research area, belonged to Group 3 (for more information, see the appendix). However, the time of blackouts and temporary solutions to them varied even within each group. According to survey results, 75 stores (87.2%) had experienced blackouts, but the number of blackouts differed among stores
Rolling Blackouts and Changes to Everyday Life in Suburban Tokyo: Survey of Kunitachi’s Local Shopping Streets

Sunmee KIM

2) Damages and Changes after the Fukushima Nuclear Accident

Not only rolling blackouts but also the prolonged influence of radioactive emissions have changed and damaged local shopping streets. In the survey, more than one third of all stores (31 stores, 36%) replied that they experienced some kind of change after the nuclear accident. In order to protect themselves and attract customers again, shopkeepers started check the production area while stocking goods, and they displayed and explained the radioactivity safety information of products and services: Nevertheless,
product sales dropped partly because of the damage to the production area (See figure 4 below).

The survey showed a considerable difference in the impact of the disaster depending on the types of products and services of each store. Restaurants and delicatessens experienced considerable damage to both sales and store management. Only two stores, both restaurants, reported that they measured radioactivity. One electrical store was forced to change its sales strategy; its owner described, “We had been promoting our electrification to our customers so far, but I’m regretting it. Now I’m aware of the need to save electricity.

3) “Mood of Self-restraint” (Zishuku) and Changes in Sales

Immediately after the earthquake, the media frequently mentioned the rapid spread of a collective “mood of self-restraint (自粛ムード).” In our study, this statement appeared to be partly true; two-third of respondents (58 stores) answered that they actually experienced such a mood. Stores such as restaurants, clothing apparels and cosmetics stores tended to take the mood of self-restraint more seriously than grocery stores or pharmacies, which sell life necessities such as rice, vegetables, canned food, mineral water, toilet paper, and batteries (See figure 5).
Tokyo metropolitan area, until March 16.8

The retail situation improved partly from July to August. Forty-two percent of stores (35 stores) reported that their sales had increased or were stagnant. However, some grocery and food stores answered that their sales had decreased. It is difficult to speculate the reason for this occurrence, but consumers’ awareness of food safety issues is considered as one possibility.

SUMMARY

The Great East Japan Earthquake and Fukushima nuclear disaster led to various catastrophic experiences and generated solutions, even within the same neighborhood. Following the unprecedented disaster, not only did the crisis conditions differ but also the solutions to overcome it varied among individual stores (i.e., shopkeepers). The aftermath of the disaster revealed each actor’s endurance and capacity for restoration.

In spite of major inconveniences and anxieties brought about by the disaster, the everyday life in Tokyo continues. The actual rolling blackouts have not been in effect since April, but because they can be implemented again at any time, “saving electricity” signs have remained in Kunitachi storefronts even after summer. “Saving electricity” is not just a phrase that characterizes the spring–summer of 2011; the need to save electricity partially restructured Tokyo’s everyday life, continuing up to present. Even now, the Japanese society debates upon the issues of disaster reconstruction and nuclear power.

Notes


Research

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