CFAY wraps up majority of voluntary military-assisted departures

Story and photo by MC2(SW/AW) John Smolinski, CFAY Public Affairs

The last large group of Department of Defense family members departed Commander Fleet Activities Yokosuka (CFAY) March 24, as authorized by the voluntary military-assisted departure (VMAD).

The U.S. Department of State authorized the VMAD for eligible family members of U.S. service members and Department of Defense (DoD) civilians assigned to installations on the main island of Honshu, Japan March 16.

The departure was authorized due to a deteriorating situation at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant in northern Honshu after a 9.0 earthquake struck and the tsunami that followed hit the plant March 11.

VMAD should not be confused with the term evacuation, as military and DoD civilians were not directed to leave. Each family had to make the decision based on factors for their unique situation.

"The best thing we have been able to do throughout this whole process is to give people a peace of mind during a very stressful situation." said Ester Franklin, Adolescent Substance Abuse Counseling Service counselor at Yokosuka Middle School, who has volunteered to help with the processing at the James D. Kelly Fleet Recreation Center.

CFAY registered and transported more than 1,300 family members who travelled by government contracted flights from Yokosuka to Seattle and Travis Air Force Base.

Personnel support detachment (PSD) Yokosuka has processed more than 3,100 flight requests through the commercial travel office (CTO) for travel out of Japan since the authorization went into affect.

"We've gone into 24-hour service mode, setting up a three-section rotation so that we may accept requests for government-funded travel around the clock," said Lt. Cmdr. Jed Espiritu, officer-in-charge, PSD Yokosuka. "The commercial travel office here has also put in long hours, coming in on weekends all without a single complaint, something monumentally important in this operation."

Yokosuka Middle School Adolescent Substance Abuse Counseling Service counselor Ester Franklin processes military family members for a military-assisted flight as authorized by the voluntary military-assisted departure here at the James D. Kelly Fleet Recreation Center March 24. Franklin volunteered to help assist with the processing of more than 1,300 family members who travelled by government contracted flights to Seattle and Travis Air Force Base.

CFAY hosts 82 tenant commands that support operating forces throughout the Western Pacific, including 11 high-operational-tempo warships forward-deployed.

"Both PSD military and civilians have been working long hours since Saturday, and that is a testament to this detachment's teamwork and dedication," Espiritu said.

CFAY, PSD Yokosuka and other commands came together to accomplish a unified, customer-focused mission.

"Throughout this operation, I've seen continuous improvement in the way we process, track and ticket flights," said Espiritu. "I've watched customers here being kind and considerate to other customers and our clerks, despite some confusion and anxiety, even dropping off cookies and baked goods. I've seen overwhelming support for Yokosuka dependents from our assigned Chaplain, Lt. Cmdr. Doug Vrieland, the Fleet and Family Support Center, and various other commands that have volunteered to provide comfort and assistance to the family members departing from Japan."

Departed personnel will be provided return travel to Japan when directed by the Under Secretary of Defense.

"CFAY is looking forward to the return of family members who departed voluntarily," said CFAY Command Master Chief Gregory Vidaurri. "Once authorization is provided for the return of our family members, our goal is reunite our Sailors with their families as soon as possible."

CFAY candlelight vigil held for Japan earthquake, tsunami victims

Story and photo by Joe Schmitt, CFAY Public Affairs

Commander Fleet Activities Yokosuka (CFAY) Chapel of Hope held a candlelight vigil March 19, for the victims and people who are suffering from the aftermath of the 9.0 magnitude earthquake and subsequent tsunami that occurred in northern Japan March 11.

"The reason we put this program together was to join the community of many faiths in prayer concerning one event that affects many people," said CFAY Chapel of Hope Chaplain Cmdr. Barry Metzger. "So, our goal is pray for the people of Japan who have been so affected by this tragedy and by these events, for those who are helping in the process in so many ways and also for military and family members who gathered here as part of this community."

The service was conducted in English with a Japanese translation for some of the speeches given by members of the CFAY community. Chapel of Hope organist Tamami Hatakeyama, performed the translations for the event.

"The Japanese words were touching and the English words were touching. Even though they were different language, you could get the heart feeling," said Hatakeyama.

Speaking on behalf of the Buddhist faith, Chapel of Hope Buddhist lay leader Merlyn Hirata, recited writings from the 13th century Japanese monk Nichiren.

"No matter where a person is or what his situation may be, a person who lives based on faith will be able to open up a fresh start. Such a person will be able to clear the way towards a future of unlimited hope from now. A person of faith definitely will be able to adorn his life with happiness for himself and for others by reviving his own spirit and his community," Hirata read to the audience.

The gathered group sang songs that emphasized coming together as a community as example of how the attendees felt towards their Japanese neighbor who were suffering from the disasters. The words to one of the songs said "I need you, you need me, stand with me" and "you are all important to me, I need you to survive."

The event finished with attendees lighting their candles from the candles of "hope" and "healing" while singing the closing song.

"I really appreciate this and I really thank them. I'm really glad America is friendly and supportive to Japan," said Hatakeyama. That's why I'm so thankful; I really believe that this feeling will reach all the people especially those who are suffering."

The community members were welcomed to stay after the event as long as the wanted to stay. Some of the attendees who stayed behind wrote their feelings and thoughts on a large piece of paper that will be sent with donations to the Sendai, Japan area.

Chapel of Hope Chaplain Lt. Sharon Reives sings during a candlelight vigil held here March 19, for the victims and people who are suffering from the aftermath of the 9.0 magnitude earthquake and subsequent tsunami that occurred in northern Japan March 11.