



Yakuza to the Rescue

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by [Jake Adelstein \(/contributors/jake-adelstein.html\)](/contributors/jake-adelstein.html) | March 18, 2011 5:0 AM EDT

Even Japan's infamous mafia groups are helping out with the relief efforts and showing a strain of civic duty. Jake Adelstein reports on why the police don't want you to know about it. Plus, more coverage of Japan's crisis.

The worst of times sometimes brings out the best in people, even in Japan's "losers" a.k.a. the Japanese mafia, *the yakuza*. Hours after the first shock waves hit, two of the largest crime groups went into action, opening their offices to those stranded in Tokyo, and shipping food, water, and blankets to the devastated areas in two-ton trucks and whatever vehicles they could get moving. The day after the earthquake the *Inagawa-kai* (the third largest organized crime group in Japan which was founded in 1948) sent twenty-five four-ton trucks filled with paper diapers, instant ramen, batteries, flashlights, drinks, and the essentials of daily life to the Tohoku region. An executive in *Sumiyoshi-kai*, the second-largest crime group, even offered refuge to members of the foreign community—something unheard of in a still slightly xenophobic nation, especially amongst the right-wing yakuza. The *Yamaguchi-gumi*, Japan's largest crime group, under the leadership of Tadashi Irie, has also opened its offices across the country to the public and been sending truckloads of supplies, but very quietly and without any fanfare.

Gallery: [Yakuza's Tattooed Mafiosos \(/galleries/2011/03/17/yakuza-tattoos.html\)](/galleries/2011/03/17/yakuza-tattoos.html)



[\(/galleries/2011/03/17/yakuza-tattoos.html\)](http://galleries/2011/03/17/yakuza-tattoos.html)

Intricate tattoo of a member of the Yakuza, the Japanese mafia. (Michael Rubenstein / Redux)

The *Inagawa-kai* has been the most active because it has strong roots in the areas hit. It has several "blocks" or regional groups. Between midnight on March 12th and the early morning of March 13th, the *Inagawa-kai* Tokyo block carried 50 tons of supplies to Hitachinaka City Hall (Hitachinaka City, Ibaraki Prefecture) and dropped them off, careful not to mention their yakuza affiliation so that the donations weren't rejected. This was the beginning of their humanitarian efforts. Supplies included cup ramen, bean sprouts, paper diapers, tea and drinking water. The drive from Tokyo took them twelve hours. They went through back roads to get there. The Kanagawa Block of the *Inagawa-kai*, has sent 70 trucks to the Ibaraki and Fukushima areas to drop off supplies in areas with high radiations levels. They didn't keep track of how many tons of supplies they moved. The *Inagawa-kai* as a whole has moved over 100 tons of supplies to the Tohoku region. They have been going into radiated areas without any protection or potassium iodide.

The *Yamaguchi-gumi* member I spoke with said simply, "Please don't say any more than we are doing our best to help. Right now, no one wants to be associated with us and we'd hate to have our donations rejected out of hand."

To those not familiar with the yakuza, it may come as a shock to hear of their philanthropy, but this is not the first time that they have displayed a humanitarian impulse. In 1995, after the Kobe earthquake, the *Yamaguchi-gumi* was one of the most responsive forces on the ground, quickly getting supplies to the affected areas and distributing them to the local people. Admittedly, much of those supplies were paid with by money from years of shaking down the people in the area, and they were certainly not unaware of the public relations factor—but no one can deny that they were helpful when people needed aid—as they are this time as well.

It may seem puzzling that the yakuza, which are organized crime groups, deriving their principal revenue streams from illegal activities, such as collecting protection money, blackmail, extortion, and fraud would have any civic nature at all. However, in Japan since the post-war period they have always played a role in keeping the peace. According to Robert Whiting's *Tokyo Underworld* and Tim Weiner's *Legacy of Ashes*, the US government even bought the services of one infamous yakuza fixer, Yoshio Kodama, to keep Japan from going communist and maintain order. Kodama would later put up the funding to create the Liberal Democrat Party of Japan that ruled the country for over fifty years. When President Obama

visited Japan last year, the police contacted the heads of all Tokyo yakuza groups and asked them to behave themselves and make sure there were no problems.

As one members said, “There are no yakuza or katagi (ordinary citizens) or gaijin (foreigners) in Japan right now. We are all Japanese. We all need to help each other.”

But let’s be clear, the yakuza are criminals, albeit with self-imposed restraints, and in their way may actually keep street crime (muggings, purse-snatching, theft) down. Many Japanese still admire or tolerate them. In fact, a Nara Police Prefectural police study found that amongst adults under 40, one in ten felt that the yakuza should be allowed to exist or were “a necessary evil.”

There is an unwritten agreement amongst the police and the yakuza groups that is acceptable for them to perform volunteer activities during a crisis but not to seek publicity for it. Before the crisis the police were cracking down severely on the yakuza and any activity placing them in a heroic light might make the police look foolish. So they have been very quietly doing their part. It is not that the yakuza are not PR savvy, as is evidenced by their careful control and limited appearances in six fan magazines (three monthly, three weekly) that write of their exploits; it is that right now they care more about getting the job done than getting credit for it. As one members said, “There are no yakuza or katagi (ordinary citizens) or gaijin (foreigners) in Japan right now. We are all Japanese. We all need to help each other.”

A bit of background: Japan has 80,000 members belonging to these criminal organizations, which the police label *shiteiboryokudan* or literally “designated violent groups”; membership is not illegal although the police regulate their activities, much the way the SEC regulates Goldman Sachs. Their income is largely derived from protection money, security services, financial fraud, stock manipulations, gambling, blackmail, prostitution, and loan sharking. They call themselves “yakuza.” The word comes from a losing hand in traditional Japanese gambling: 8 (ya) 9 (ku) 3(za) which adds up to 20, and is a useless hand. Thus to be a yakuza is to be “a loser.” It’s a self-effacing term. They yakuza don’t call themselves “violent groups.” They exist out in the open; they have offices, business cards, fan magazines. The three major groups, the

Yamaguchi-gumi (40,000 members), the *Sumiyoshi-kai* (12,000) and the *Inagawa-kai* (10,000) all insist they are chivalrous groups, like the Rotary Club, that they are *ninkyō-dantai*.

Ninkyō(do), according to yakuza historical scholars is a philosophy that values humanity, justice, and duty and that forbids one from watching others suffer or be troubled without doing anything about it. Believers of “the way” are expected to put their own lives on the line and sacrifice themselves to help the weak and the troubled. The yakuza often simplify it as “to help the weak and fight the strong,” in theory. In practice, the film director Itami Juzo, who was attacked by members of the Yamaguchi-gumi Goto-gumi because of his films depicting them harshly, said “the yakuza are all about exploiting the weak and disadvantaged in society, and run away from anyone strong enough to stand up to them and their exploitive extortion.” He was primarily correct, I think. However, sometimes, like today in Japan, they live up to their original values.

Of course, most yakuza are just tribal sociopaths who merely pay lip service to the words. But in times like this every helping hand is welcome, and maybe, maybe for a few weeks, both the police and the yakuza can declare a peace treaty and work together to save lives and ensure the safety of the people of Japan. To some extent, the police have even given their tacit support to the yakuza aid efforts. That’s the spirit of *ninkyōdo*. It’s also the spirit of many of the Japanese people. It is why I have no doubts that Japan will weather this crisis and come back stronger than ever.

Naoya Kaneko, the deceased Sumiyoshi-kai boss who was a friend and a source, once said, “In times of crisis, you learn the measure of a man.” To understand the real meaning of that you have to understand

how the generally male-dominated and sexist yakuza define “a man.” The core of that is *giri*, a word that can be translated many different ways but which I interpret to mean: reciprocity. Today, the Japanese people and even the yakuza are measuring up very well to that standard of behavior.

Jake Adelstein was a reporter for the Yomiuri Shinbun, Japan’s largest newspaper, from 1993 to 2005. From 2006 to 2007 he was the chief investigator for a U.S. State Department-sponsored study of human trafficking in Japan. Considered one of the foremost experts on organized crime in Japan, he works as a writer and consultant in Japan and the United States. He is also the public relations director for the Washington, D.C.-based Polaris Project Japan, which combats human trafficking and the exploitation of women and children in the sex trade. He is the author of [Tokyo Vice: An American Reporter on the Police Beat in Japan](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0307475298/thedaibea-20/) (<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0307475298/thedaibea-20/>) (Vintange).

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