

Libraries and bookstores aid efforts after earthquakes

IN Mashiki, a town in the central part of the Kumamoto prefecture seriously damaged by a series of quakes in April last year, the municipal library has set up a corner called Shinsai Bunko (archive of earthquake-related items).

The library asked residents to donate materials related to the disaster to be placed in the corner.

These include photographs and items distributed at the time as well as posters put up in the wake of the disaster, which claimed more than 220 lives.

More than 10,000 such items are among the collection. They vividly illustrate the situation at the time of the disaster.

"The staff of the library want to preserve memories of the earthquake for future generations," said librarian Mami Nishimura, 50.

After the major quake, many of the 130,000 books on the library shelves ended up on the floor. Lighting equipment was also broken.

To offer evacuees even the slightest distraction, the library placed books by the entrance so they could freely read them.

The staff later opened a temporary library and held events such as a meeting for casual conversations. Nishimura's house was damaged



Picking up the pieces: Residents walking on a street next to houses destroyed in the recent earthquakes in Mashiki in Kumamoto. — AFP

and she was temporarily living in a tent.

"I felt relieved to do any kind of work," she said.

The municipal library resumed service later. Many of the 4,000 books lent to residents were

returned. As of February, the number of missing books had fallen to 475. Nishimura said she felt how deeply the town residents love books.

The Kumamoto Prefectural Library in the city of Kumamoto

fully resumed its service on March 29 after partially reopening.

The prefectural library stores one million books and other items. Many of the books had been knocked to the floor in the quake. Bookshelves in the storerooms had toppled over.

As a cultural base for the prefecture, the library is strictly required to collect and store every single issue of the various newspapers and magazines published in the prefecture.

Kenichi Nagasaki, 38, who runs two Nagasaki Shoten bookstore branches in Kumamoto, recalled the days following the disaster, saying "after experiencing the earthquake, I really felt that books were essential for our daily lives."

After the main tremor, about 40% of the books fell off their shelves in both stores.

But there was no serious damage to any facilities or equipment in the stores.

Both were able to start up again by operating temporarily or opening for limited hours.

Nagasaki continued to run his business, even as his house was without water for one-and-a-half months.

When copies of Corocoro Comic, a manga magazine published by

Shogakukan Inc., were delivered to his stores, he displayed notices saying Corocoro is available at the store entrances. He hoped that residents would rediscover the pleasures of their usual daily lives.

Nagasaki also collected articles from book industry publications that had appeared just after the Great East Japan Earthquake, to utilise lessons from the disaster.

Maps sold well, as did a book featuring Doraemon. The book - *Doraemon no Jishin wa Naze Okoru, Do Mi wo Mamoru* (Doraemon explains why earthquakes occur and how you can protect yourself) is for parents and children to learn about earthquakes.

As evacuees spent longer and longer in shelters, drill books for children to study sold well. Nagasaki felt how closely books are connected to people's everyday lives.

Hisako Tajiri, 47, who runs Daidai Shoten Orenji, a bookstore and coffee shop in Kumamoto, sent a message to *The Yomiuri Shimbun* on April 22 last year, just after she reopened her store.

"My customers had smiles on their faces when they told me they felt relieved to see the lights on in my store," she said. — The Yomiuri Shimbun/Asia News Network