



# The Notes of a Commanding Officer on Site: A Complete 15-Day Record of the Wuhan “Evacuation of Japanese Citizens”: Operating Throughout the Nights, No Time to Be Afraid

**Ueno Atsushi, Director-General / Assistant Minister, International Cooperation Bureau, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (Former Deputy Chief of Mission of Japanese Embassy in China)**

Starting in late January, the Japanese government had a total of five chartered airplanes fly to Wuhan City in Hubei Province, China to bring home 828 Japanese citizens living in Hubei Province as well as their families, including Chinese nationals. I was responsible for the “field team” (known as Team A) that assisted in operating flights 1 through 4. This article is a record of those activities.

I had been involved in operations to evacuate Japanese citizens from Beijing during the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests and responding to SARS in 2003. It is not that I attract emergencies, but the reality is that these kinds of emergencies can happen anywhere at any time. This is why it is necessary to have a range of systems and equipment in place at all times. At the same time, everyone living abroad needs to stay prepared.

This is also why I decided to write to all readers to convey the reality of the operation to evacuate Japanese citizens from Wuhan.



Ueno Atsushi, Director-General / Assistant Minister, International Cooperation Bureau, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan

## January 23

It was on the morning of January 23 when I checked the news site *Toutiao* on my phone that I first heard about the Wuhan lockdown. After going to work, I was alarmed to find out that all transportation in and out of Wuhan had been suspended and that the roads were blocked as of 10 a.m.

The “Novel Coronavirus Countermeasures Office” led by the director-general of the consular section was set up at the Japanese Embassy in China in January, but when we were notified of the Wuhan lockdown, the office was upgraded to “Embassy Countermeasures HQ” with the ambassador as its head and myself as the acting head, and we decided to split into groups and gather information.

There was a reception at the Embassy of India during the day. I was the deputy chief, meaning the second in command, which is known as DCM (deputy chief of mission) in the world of diplomacy, and DCMs are normally in contact with each other. DCMs from India, the United States, South Korea, France, and other countries were also present at this reception and we exchanged information.

I heard that the United States was already discussing specific measures such as dispatching chartered planes to evacuate the members of the consulate general and their family in Wuhan. I returned to the embassy and reported what I had heard at the reception to Yokoi Yutaka, Ambassador of Japan to China, and I immediately sent an embassy cable to the Ministry in Japan.

## **January 24**

The Japanese Embassy started discussing our response from 10 p.m. We concluded that the only way to evacuate Japanese citizens was to “fly government-chartered planes or private-chartered planes to Wuhan and take everyone who so wishes to Japan at once.” Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu in Tokyo also gave instructions to dispatch chartered planes. I called the director of the Second China and Mongolia Division at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA) after 11 p.m. and conveyed that the Japanese Embassy in China agreed that government planes or chartered plans were needed.

Meanwhile, a dedicated “hotline” manned around the clock was set up at the Japanese Embassy to assuage the fears of Japanese citizens living in the affected area. The number was not announced externally but we made sure it was communicated to the people in the area via the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) office and the Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry in China (CJCCI) in Wuhan. This is because we feared that we would receive inquiries from all over China as well as Japan, which might prevent the people in Wuhan who needed it most from getting through. However, although it was helpful for business people, it was difficult to support exchange students and others with just this hotline.

## **Seesawing Communication from the Chinese**

### **January 25**

It was the first day of the Chinese New Year, but it did not feel jovial at all. The Ministry in Japan was coordinating with the other relevant ministries in preparation for dispatching ANA chartered planes to Wuhan, and we were told to prepare a reception team on-site since the plan would include sending staff to the Japanese Embassy in Beijing.

At an embassy meeting from 5 p.m., I said that I would personally lead it but that I wanted the medical attaché, consular staff, and logistics staff to come with me. As a result, we had an on-site team (Team A) of eight people, including those volunteering to go to Wuhan. We also had the Beijing team for the Wuhan evacuation operation (Beijing team) led by the director of economic affairs, and we immediately set to work.

However, the problem was how to get to Wuhan. In the evening, we received word from the Hubei Provincial Foreign Affairs Office (Hubei Office) that, “If you use the High-Speed Railway, you have special permission to disembark at Wuhan Station.” Yet that same night, the same office let us know that “The High-Speed Railway will no longer stop at Wuhan Station.”

Our next idea was to first travel with a domestic line to some place near Wuhan, such as neighboring Changsha City in Hunan Province, and then enter Wuhan with a rented car. However, after speaking to several car rental companies at Changsha airport, we were told that “We can’t rent out any cars bound for Wuhan.”

Yet around midnight, Hubei Office told us that, “We will let you enter Wuhan if you are in a car with a diplomatic number plate from Beijing.” Initially, we considered driving several cars ourselves, but in order to load the medical supplies and other things in addition to the eight embassy staff members and our luggage, it became clear that we had to use the embassy’s biggest car, which was a “minibus.”

The problem with a minibus is that the driver’s licenses of myself and the other Japanese staff would not let us drive it. Luckily, we had two brave Chinese drivers with a driver’s license for large size vehicles at the Japanese Embassy volunteer by the following morning. It was thanks to them that we finally had the chance of getting to Wuhan.

## **17 Hours to Enter Wuhan**

### **January 26**

We were busy packing for Wuhan since morning and I received a phone call from the Ministry’s Akiba Takeo, Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs, who had heard that I was leading Team A and wanted to give me his support as well as instruct me to put safety first.

At 2 p.m., we departed the embassy in the minibus. Seen from Beijing, Wuhan is located about 1,200 km southwest. There is a wonderful highway all the way to Wuhan, but the minibus consumed a lot of fuel so we had to refuel every three to four hours and find a service area every time. Along the way, we had dinner at a Pizza Hut that was found by diplomatic secretary Y, the youngest member of Team A.

We thought it would be fine to stay the night somewhere and reach Wuhan at some point the next day, but the two drivers told us that, “There’s no need to stay anywhere since we’ll drive in shifts,” so we went nonstop except for refueling and toilet breaks.

The closer we got to the Hubei provincial boundary, the emptier the roads became in front and to the back of us as well as in the opposite lane. We grew increasingly nervous. At the same time, although we had expected strict controls at the provincial boundary and the city boundary of Wuhan, there were actually no checks at all, and we arrived at Shangri-La Hotel Wuhan at 7 a.m. on the 27th, 17 hours after departure.

### **January 27**

In reality, we had not yet decided where we were going to stay when we departed from Beijing.

We had a number of suggestions for hotels in areas with many Japanese where we could set up a meeting room, but the Hubei Office told us that, “Letting in people from outside the city and especially foreigners to Wuhan under lockdown will require permission from higher up,” so secretary Y continued to coordinate throughout the trip.

In the end, we were able to stay at our first choice, Shangri-La Hotel. We were all exhausted but we had extremely limited time before the chartered planes were taking off. We only napped for two hours in our rooms before gathering in the work room at the hotel and opening the field office.



The team hold a meeting soon after arriving at the Shangri-La Hotel in Wuhan on January 27, 2020.

We were soon visited by Mr. N of Honda Motor, Mr. A of Nippon Steel, Mr. O, and the deputy director general of JETRO Wuhan who were staying at the Shangri-La Hotel, and we asked them about the local situation. Mr. S, director of JETRO Wuhan, had gone back to Japan on vacation but was communicating with the people at CJCCI from Japan through the communication app *WeChat*. They had already compiled a list of the more than 400 Japanese citizens living in Wuhan. Mr. N and Mr. A had also prepared materials with maps of the main apartment buildings and hotels with Japanese residents. We were extremely grateful for their support.



## The Overseas Residential Registrations and the “Tabi-Regi” Were a Challenge

Yet this is when the real trouble started. We had to “accurately” grasp how many Japanese were in Hubei Province and how many of them wished to return to Japan in a chartered airplane. However, at this point, we only had access to “overseas residential registrations” and “overseas travel registrations” (“Tabi-Regi,” a registration system for travelers not obligated to submit an overseas residential registration), and we tried to seek out all the Japanese there based on that information, but not everyone was registered and we also had cases of persons who had already returned to Japan without being registered, so it was extremely difficult to get an accurate idea of how many were there. This was a major challenge ahead of what was to come.

Because of this, our colleagues in Beijing repeatedly sent emails called “Consul Email Alerts” to all the contact addresses they had and asked them to notify the Japanese Embassy if they knew any unregistered Japanese persons in Hubei Province. They collected information like addresses, passport numbers, and whether they wish to go to Japan or not from the people replying and created lists. This was hard work.



The Wuhan bus drivers collected Japanese citizens to the Wuhan airport.

At the same time, the most difficult task for “Team A” was the “land transportation” to bring the passengers to the airport. At this point, the use of general vehicles was prohibited in Wuhan so there were no buses or other public transportation.

After discussions with the local authorities, we had companies like Honda, Nissan, and Canon use their own cars to take employees and staff dispatched from related companies to the airport, but for all other Japanese, we decided to rent several buses, go around to all major hotels and apartment houses, and pick up the passengers.

It was not easy to find companies willing to rent out buses to strangers from a foreign embassy in Wuhan under lockdown, but of fantastic help here was Mr. Zhu Dunrao, who was introduced by Mr. S of JETRO Wuhan and runs an IT company in Wuhan. He wanted to “give back to Japan” as he had studied at the University of Tokyo and worked in Japan, and also had good connections with the local authorities and the business world as a representative in the Hubei People’s Congress.

We were able to rent a maximum of eight large buses thanks to the assistance of Mr. Zhu and had them go around about thirty pick-up locations in Wuhan City to collect the passengers. The maps we got from Mr. N and Mr. A in the morning were extremely helpful for deciding on the pick-up locations.

## **The US Chartered Airplane That Took My Breath Away**

### **January 28**

It was at early dawn on the 28th that the Chinese authorities gave permission for the first chartered airplane flight. ANA’s B767-300 was scheduled to arrive at Wuhan Airport that night, but we had a mountain of unsolved problems that morning.

We did not even know how many could fit onboard. The aircraft’s capacity is 270, but ANA staff, support staff, and people from MOFA and the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (MHLW) were coming from Japan, with half of them flying back to Haneda Airport in the same aircraft, so we needed to subtract that number. We also needed to secure space to isolate passengers if they became ill onboard the airplane as well as free up several rows between seats (we would later call these spaces “sanctuaries”).

We calculated the potential number of passengers to be 210. But the number of people who had signaled their willingness to go back to Japan by replying to the Japanese Embassy’s Consul Email Alerts was over 500 by the morning of the 28th.

It was suggested that we should prioritize elderly people and families with children, but in order to handle the land transportation smoothly under these circumstances, it would be best to pick up the passengers for the first flight in nearby locations. After discussing the matter, we decided to start with the people in the Hankou District of Wuhan City, where the largest number of people wanting to go was gathered and which is closest to the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market, the suspected ground zero of the infection.

Around 11 p.m., everyone in Team A headed to the airport. We saw the US chartered airplane that had arrived some time earlier, and it took my breath away. The airframe was the well-known B747 model, but on the side, it said “KALITTA AIR” in big letters, which I had never seen before. There was not a single window. I later found out that it was a cargo vessel normally used for military transportation, and that made perfect sense, but I did feel it would probably be terrible to go back all the way to the United States in an airplane like that.



Check-in line of Japanese citizens at the Wuhan airport.

The Japanese chartered airplane also landed and we started checking in the members from Tokyo and the other passengers. There was someone who felt unwell but we deemed that they were fit for boarding and had them sit in the back. Everyone had gone through the departure inspection by 2 a.m. on the following day of January 29, but there was some trouble with the US chartered airplane that was taking off first, so our departure was delayed. We were waiting impatiently in the departure lounge, but were relieved to see the chartered airplane with 206 Japanese citizens from Wuhan take off at 4.57 a.m.

Four young MOFA staff members who had come from Tokyo on the first flight also remained in Wuhan and the Team A grew to twelve members (and then to thirteen with the addition of one more from the third flight).



## The Drivers Who Disappeared with the Buses

### January 29

The first flight's return to Japan became big news and our colleagues in Tokyo became busy answering a range of questions coming from the media and Diet members. I just wanted to go back to my hotel room and sleep, but questions were also directed to me in Wuhan from Ministry staff and relevant departments, so there was really no time for me to sleep soundly.

The other members also started preparations for the second flights after a few hours of napping. Having coordinated matters with the Chinese side, the second flight was also designated “for residents of Wuhan City only.” Yet the biggest problem was that the Chinese suddenly became very nervous about the Japanese passengers after a Japanese media report that “three passengers from the first flight had tested positive for corona.”

First it was the drivers of the eight buses for land transportation who heard about this while standing by (it was a news flash in China), boycotted the driving, and disappeared from the gathering point with the buses. We tried to persuade them over the phone, but they curtly refused, saying, “We don't want to go back.”

It was Mr. Zhu Dunrao who saved us from this predicament. At this time, Mr. Zhu was negotiating with the Wuhan deputy mayor to work out a way to borrow buses and drivers from a bus company affiliated with the Hubei provincial government. Not only that, but those buses came with “travel permits” that allowed them to move freely within Wuhan City, thus allowing the buses to operate without us having to make advance applications for the land transportation routes one by one to the Wuhan City government.

However, this was not the only after-effect of the positive tests. Compared to the first flight, the inspection of Japanese passengers became much stricter after that. There was no rigorous fever testing on the first flight, but for the second



The inspection of Japanese passengers at the Wuhan airport became much stricter.



flight, Chinese side applied their standard of “37.3 degrees” to refuse people from boarding.

As a result, two persons were not allowed to board and we were kept at the airport because the Chinese side said that, “they will be transported to a hospital by ambulance.” Although the Team A members were to stay with the two persons until the ambulance arrived, it never showed up even after several hours (there was a severe lack of ambulances in Wuhan City at the time, due to the spreading infection). In the end, we took the two to where they were staying.

Despite all of this, the second flight took off at 4.56 a.m. on the morning of January 30, almost the same time as the first flight, carrying 210 Japanese residents of Wuhan. Japan and Singapore were the only two countries flying chartered airplanes from Wuhan that day.

## **Why Were the Japanese Given Preferential Treatment?**

### **January 30**

We ended up flying chartered airplanes three days in a row, and this meant a lot of trouble for our colleagues in Tokyo and Beijing. Initially, the Tokyo side wanted to fly the third flight at the same time as the second to get all Japanese citizens in Wuhan and the rest of Hubei province to Japan at once, but the Chinese side were not very happy about even letting one flight operate.

In a situation where almost thirty countries were negotiating to operate chartered airplanes, the only chartered airplanes to have actually flown as of the morning of January 30 were the American plane, the Singaporean plane, and the two Japanese planes. South Korea and other countries had yet to fly one.

This prompted some in the Chinese government to ask, “Why is Japan getting preferential treatment?” The officer in charge of Japanese affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China desperately tried to convince them and managed to get them to agree on flights on three days in a row.

This was without a doubt a reflection of improved relations between Japan and China, and if relations had been as bad as they were seven or eight years ago, I am sure nobody would have listened to that officer at the Chinese Foreign Ministry. This is because “politics” is what decides things in China at all times.

Permission for the third flight came past 9 p.m. on the 30th. A mere 30 minutes after that, the third flight departed from Haneda Airport. Since the schedule was difficult to work out, our plan to have Japanese persons living in the rest of Hubei Province and capable of coming to the airport by themselves go on the third flight did not pan out. Some started traveling from the places they were staying but were then forced to turn back, so it was a lot of trouble for them.

However, our biggest tribulation that day came during the check-in procedures at the airport. The Chinese inspections that had become stricter for the second flight became even more so for the third flight and a total of seven persons were not permitted to board.

Our experience from the previous day had taught us that it was unrealistic for the Chinese side to provide an ambulance, so Team A decided to take the seven to where they were staying.

Yet the drivers from the bus company once again said that, “We don’t want to transport Japanese that might be infected” and disappeared from the airport. In the end, one of the embassy drivers who had come with us from Beijing took the seven to Wuhan in the minibus that we were supposed to ride in.

The departure of the third flight was at 6.45 a.m. on the 31st. After that, we simply awaited the return of the minibus in an empty airport lobby for nearly four hours. After more than three days of almost no sleep, this day was the one physically most strenuous.

## **Boarding Chinese Family Members**

### **January 31**

We came back to the hotel before noon and decided to rest until night. I fell into the bed and slept soundly for the first time in a long while.

### **February 2**

Thinking that Beijing and Tokyo would not contact us on a Sunday, I went to the supermarket Aeon near the hotel at 10 a.m. and took a look at the city as well. There, I bought things like fruit, natto, and rice packs for microwave heating. After that, my eating habits in Wuhan improved considerably.

### **February 3**

Our biggest challenge after the third flight was to negotiate with the Chinese side for the fourth flight to carry “Chinese citizens that are the family members of Japanese citizens” and “residents of Hubei Province outside Wuhan City.”

Since it was around the Chinese New Year, there were dozens of households where women with Chinese citizenship from Hubei and married to Japanese men were visiting their hometowns together with their children, who hold Japanese citizenship. Meanwhile, the Japanese father working in Japan has to work like normal. This meant that the mothers and children were in Hubei Province, and having heard the Japanese government’s intention to bring home everyone who so wished, there were many families who wanted to evacuate at least the children from Wuhan under lockdown and take them to Japan.

Having said that, many of the children were infants so it would not be possible for them to fly by themselves. To begin with, babies in need of breastfeeding cannot easily stay away from their mother for long.

Even so, as the Chinese side put Wuhan under lockdown and asked their own citizens to make sacrifices, they were not willing to let women with Chinese citizenship leave the country. Despite this, the persistent negotiations of the Beijing team persuaded the Chinese to allow persons with Chinese citizenship board the chartered airplane if they were the spouse, parent, or child of a Japanese citizen, and this policy was formally declared on February 3. They also granted Japanese persons living outside Wuhan City permission to return to Japan.

Nonetheless, in the case of, for example, a married couple where both are Chinese citizens, they would not be allowed to go back to Japan even if they have been granted permanent residency. There was also someone who “wished to have their chronically ill child go to a Japanese hospital,” but the answer was “no.” The medical attaché advised them that, “This medicine can be substituted with this in China.”

## **February 5**

Permission for the fourth flight was granted. It arrived in the middle of the night on the 6th with a planned departure from Wuhan at 3 a.m. on the 7th. That all the flights came and went in the middle of the night starting with the first flight was likely so as not to alarm the citizens of Wuhan. We also went back with the fourth flight and our work at the airport was transferred to our successors (Team B).

The passengers scheduled for boarding also included Japanese staying in Hubei Province outside of Wuhan City. We found out that there were two students in Miao Autonomous Prefecture, more than 500 km from Wuhan. Others were also scattered across Hubei. We had considered picking all of them up with our rented buses, but it would take too much time. We decided to have persons staying in remote areas arrange cars by themselves and approach Wuhan by distributing travel permits issued by the Hubei provincial government to them.

We ran into various problems, such as cars not being able to take the expected routes, poor communication between local authorities, and cars being stopped for inspections, but in the end, everyone managed to reach the airport by the night of the 6th, using a total of fifty-eight vehicles that included fifty cars arranged by passengers themselves and the eight buses we had rented.

## **Pre-Temperature Inspection “Measures”**

### **February 6**

We checked out from the hotel past 10 p.m. and headed for the airport that we had left just one week prior. The fourth flight arrived before the date changed and the members of the “Team B” headed by Endo Kazuya, deputy director-general of the Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau, disembarked. We greeted each other and explained the check-in procedures.

The fourth flight carried 119 Japanese residents as well as 77 Chinese citizens and two Taiwanese citizens. The majority of the Chinese citizens were accompanied by small children, in some cases a mother taking care of two or three children. Unlike how it had been up until the third flight where most people around the check-in counter were Japanese adult men, it was pretty lively now with children running around and people speaking both Chinese and Japanese.

We did our very best to ensure that everyone could pass the Chinese inspections smoothly, unlike what happened for the second and third flights. For example, we carefully explained in Japanese and Chinese how to fill out the “quarantine questionnaire” that the authorities requested and thoroughly checked for fever symptoms since that was what the Chinese quarantine officers worried about the most.



Our experiences thus far had taught us that measuring temperature while wearing a down jacket or underwear in heat tech material would yield slightly higher values. Thus, we asked people to take off their down jackets a bit before the temperature inspection. Such “measures” were successful as not one of the passengers on the fourth flight were caught in the Chinese inspections and they were able to proceed to the boarding gate.

The delayed departure of an American flight scheduled to take off first meant that we had to wait at the departure gate, but we finally took off from Wuhan Airport at 6.42 a.m. on the 7th.

The ANA flight attendants onboard wore full-body protective suits while food and beverages were in plastic bags already hung by each seat. A Chinese woman sitting to my left repeatedly thanked Team A’s defense attaché I, who was sitting to her left, for allowing family members with Chinese citizenship to board and for the land transportation. I was unable to sleep for a while due to the excitement and the relief, but then fell asleep at some point and was at Haneda Airport before I knew it.

## **The Reason I Headed Team A**

Many people have told me that, “I don’t know how you could go to Wuhan at that time,” but there was no time to be afraid. To begin with, ensuring the safety of Japanese citizens abroad is the most fundamental and most important duty of MOFA staff. I felt very honored to have been directly involved in this operation.

Another thing I have been told is that, “You should have left it to your subordinates.” Yet I was of the opinion that “the one who suggests something” should also be the one to do it.

More than anything else, it would be meaningless to create a team in Wuhan if there is no one there who can make decisions without getting confirmation from Tokyo or Beijing. I also thought there needed to be someone there representing the government when communicating with Japanese residents and local authorities. This is why I decided to head Team A.

Something I want to emphasize at the same time is that this operation was not something that could have been carried out by the on-site team alone. I want to express my sincere gratitude to everyone who worked together with us.

**Author’s note:** This account is based on my own experiences and memories, so any factual inaccuracies or discrepancies with the perceptions of others are my own responsibility. My job title is from that time.

*Translated from “Genchi Shikikan no Shuki: Bukan ‘Hojin-kyushutsu’ 15-nichikan Zenkiroku—Tetsuya tsuzuki no opereishon, kyofu wo kanjiru yoyu nado nakatta (The Notes of a Commanding Officer on Site: A Complete 15-Day Record of the Wuhan “Evacuation of Japanese Citizens”: Operating Throughout the Nights, No Time to Be Afraid),” Bungeishunju, September 2020, pp. 282-291. (Courtesy of Bungeishunju, Ltd.) [September 2020]*

---

**UENO Atsushi**

Director-General / Assistant Minister, International Cooperation Bureau, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, the former Deputy Chief of Mission of Japanese Embassy in China

---