



WORRIED: Hiro Nishiuchi and wife Maki sharing his story about his family with Aviva CEO Simon Newman.

PHOTO COURTESY OF: HI-TRI

Carrying on in their name

Japanese triathletes say they will still compete in honour of quake victims

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HE CAME to Singapore with his wife for the Aviva Ironman 70.3 Triathlon on Sunday.

But nothing could've prepared Hiroyuki Nishiuchi, 35, for the news that greeted him on his arrival last Friday.

As he stepped off the plane, Hiro received the news that a magnitude 9.0 earthquake had devastated the area of Sendai where he grew up.

He has some 50 relatives living in the Fukushima Prefecture.

Although the Internet gave him indication that his relatives were mostly safe, it wasn't until midweek when he finally got a clear telephone call through.

He said: "Three days ago we were finally able to get better phone reception.

"It's still a little touch and go on the quality of the reception but we found that nearly everyone's okay."

But two relatives – Hiro's 23-year-old cousin and the cousin's grandmother, who is about 80 years old – are missing.

Satellite photographs have shown that the tsunami had decimated the area where they lived.

Hiro suspects that both of them were in their home at the time.

Despite this, he isn't giving up hope.

"We talked about it and thought maybe it wasn't the best to do the event, but we can't get back to the area where my cousin and grandmother were to actually help – there's nothing we can do there in Japan physically."

– Japanese triathlete Hiroyuki Nishiuchi

"Their names are not on the list of people that have been known not to have survived," he added.

"Maybe they've relocated after explosion at the nuclear plant, but we don't know at this point."

The explosion is another worry his family has to cope with.

Hiro's family live just 23km from the Fukushima nuclear plants.

Yesterday, the Japanese government raised the nuclear threat level to five,

the second highest after the level seven Chernobyl disaster in the Ukraine in 1986.

Hiro's family, only recently told to leave the area as the evacuation zone was extended from 20km to 30km, are struggling to get out.

Said his wife, Maki, 35: "Everyone is worried about Hiro's family because they're in an area where there is very little petrol and supplies, so it is very difficult for them to get away."

She also said the family is trying to link up with Maki's in Osaka more than 500km away, which was spared quake damage.

Despite these issues weighing heavily on his mind, the professional triathlete decided to join his wife and compete in the triathlon on Sunday.

The couple said that they would both compete to raise funds for the Japanese Red Cross to help their stricken countrymen.

Hiro said: "We talked about it and thought maybe it wasn't the best to do the event, but we can't get back to the area where my cousin and grandmother were to actually help – there's nothing we can do there in Japan physically.

"We're triathletes – we can do our race and hopefully, our courage can influence them.

"We will do our jobs here and of course we're always thinking about them," he added.

Already, race organisers Aviva have responded to their efforts, chipping in with a \$10,000 donation a day after the couple announced their intentions.

Fellow racer Kris Gemmell, a New Zealander with natural disasters fresh in his mind after the magnitude 6.3 quake that rocked Christchurch, also offered his support and well wishes to Hiro during the race's official press conference.

The couple will be sporting black armbands – a traditional Japanese symbol of mourning – at the race this Sunday along with several of their The Bike Boutique teammates.