

TRI-ING TIMES FOR COUPLE

Japanese triathletes will be racing with family, relatives in mind

BY CHAN U-GENE

JAPANESE professional triathletes Hiro and Maki Nishiuchi will race in tomorrow's Aviva Ironman 70.3 at the East Coast with their family's safety on their minds.

About 50 of Hiro's family members are stranded in Fukushima prefecture, where they live, and two relatives – a 23-year-old cousin and an elderly relative

in her 80s – are still missing following last Friday's earthquake and tsunami.

The Nishiuchis arrived from Tokyo on the day of the disaster and watched the destruction unfold on television and the Internet.

Said Hiro through a translator: "I couldn't believe it. This is the area I grew up and went to school in. I did my triathlon training there. Now it's all gone. I just couldn't believe it."

Added his wife Maki: "We are really worried because there is very low gasoline supply. It's very difficult for them to move around or to get out of the area."

Fukushima prefecture is facing a massive crisis after the earthquake and tsunami damaged a nuclear plant. Workers and the military are trying to contain the situation.

Said Hiro, who managed to phone his family four days ago: "My family live near the nuclear power plant, about 23km away. They can't leave because they don't have enough gas to evacuate. There is also no water and no food."

"I called again today and they told me they are trying to move from the place."

The couple, who were married in 2006, also saw the home of the two missing relatives destroyed by the tsunami through satellite photos.

Said Hiro, a two-time Olympian: "They could have been inside when it was destroyed. But there is still hope. They are not on the list of names of people who did not survive."

"They may have moved after the explosion of the nuclear plant, but we are not sure."

The couple, both 35, thought of returning home as soon as the disaster struck but agreed to stay on to compete and



Japanese triathletes Maki (left) and Hiro Nishiuchi, who grew up in Fukushima prefecture, will help raise funds for the earthquake and tsunami victims back home in tomorrow's Aviva Ironman 70.3. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

Follow the race

ARE you planning to watch some of the world's best compete in the Aviva Ironman 70.3? Or support your friends and family members? Or simply soak up the action?

Then you might want to download the list of road closures or a map of the race route at www.ironman703singapore.com

Spectators should park at East Coast Park carparks E1, E2 and F1. F2 will be closed and used as the bike transition area.

Organisers say the swim leg can best be viewed along East Coast beach near carpark F1. Two public viewing galleries are situated near carpark F2 – at the transition area and along the run route. Spectators can also catch the action anywhere along the route but are cautioned to avoid cordoned areas.

"We will show courage and hopefully that can influence things. We will do our jobs here and we will always think of them."

HIRO NISHIUCHI

raise funds for Japan. Interested donors can go to www.ironman703singapore.com for more details.

Event title sponsor Aviva kick-started the fund with a \$10,000 donation to the Japanese Red Cross.

Said Hiro: "There is no access to the disaster areas, so there's nothing we can do physically to help."

"We are triathletes and we can do our race. We will show courage and hopefully

that can influence things. We will do our jobs here and we will always think of them."

Hiro finished last year's Ironman 70.3 Japan in 4hr 20min 26sec, and will be making his debut in Singapore.

The duo will be joined by 30 other professionals and more than 1,700 participants in the fifth edition of the 1.9km swim, 90km bike and 21km run event.

With defending champion Craig Alex-

ander (3:53:31) giving the event a miss, last year's runner-up James Cunnama of South Africa (3:54:23) is hoping to make the step up after spending the last few weeks in Thailand acclimatising to the heat and humidity.

He will have to contend with 2005 Ironman world champion Faris Al-Sultan, a German who lives in Al Ain in the United Arab Emirates, and is no stranger to hot weather. He said: "The harsher the conditions, the better it is for me."

Favourites for the women's title are Briton Jodie Swallow, the reigning Ironman 70.3 world champion (4:06:28), and Australian Michelle Wu, who won the 2010 Ironman 70.3 in Japan in 4:51:27. Maki finished the same event in 5:01:06.

✉ ugenec@sph.com.sg