Bidding War for Housing May Begin in Quake-Damaged Area

By Sam Jameson

Hiroshi Murakami's post-earthquake struggle began when he rescued his wife from the rubble of their home late. Now he is struggling to stave off a bidding war for housing that threatens to impede a frantic search by as many as 150,000 families to find a place to live.

Murakami, 75, the deputy chairman of the prefectoral real estate dealers association, said large construction companies seeking contracts to rebuild Kobe are trying to tie up all available housing for the technicians and experts who will dismantle the area devastated by the Jan. 17 quake.

"They are throwing money in our faces," said Murakami, who also runs a real estate office. Already, three large construction companies have "offered to pay any price," Murakami said. A representative of one of the companies told him it would pay 11 times the current agent's fee, deposit and rent for any living unit that Murakami could procure for his employers, he said.

Any real estate agent in the prefectoral chapter of the association who accepts such offers will be expelled, Murakami declared angrily.

Murakami also said he was told that outside speculators might come into the areas of devastation to buy up land cheaply and reap profits later. But he added that an increase in land prices is inconceivable for the foreseeable future.

Since Japan's "bubble economy" of the late 1980s burst, land prices in Kobe have plummeted by about 50 percent on average, and by as much as 70 percent in some locations, he said. The earthquake makes a further decrease of 30 percent likely, he said.

"Nobody is going to want to live in an area as fearful as this," Murakami said.

Demand for rental homes, however, has swamped the market, Murakami said. His own real estate operation has no listings of homes and only a few for apartments or rooms. He said he hopes to offer the rooms only to the aged or infirm.

Instead of taking an apartment for himself and his wife after the quake destroyed their home, he moved in with his son, Murakami said.

Signs of an impending crisis over housing are appearing everywhere - be it signs are heart-warming. Hundreds of Japanese from around the country are offering free temporary rentals for up to a year. So too are governments in other regions of the country.

Testimony Opens in Simpson Case

By William Clabaugh

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The prosecution Tuesday opened testimony in its murder case against O.J. Simpson with a methodical recounting of the physical and mental abuse it claims Simpson inflicted on his former wife, Nicole Brown Simpson before he allegedly killed her and her friend Ron Goldman last June.

The first three witnesses whose prosecutor Christopher Darden called to the stand after seven months of pretrial hearings and jury selection provided the jury with details of a much-publicized incident early on the morning of Jan. 1, 1989, in which Simpson allegedly beat his then-wife. Simpson later pleaded no contest to a charge of stabb-