

Life in Fukushima radioactive exclusion zones

Communities in Japan's nuclear Exclusion Zone are struggling to cope with the slow pace of decontamination.

D. Parvaz Last updated: 04 Mar 2014

Tomioka, Japan - The highway leading up to the town by the damaged and leaking Daiichi nuclear plant has only been open for a couple of weeks.

But the small town, with an amazing beach and surrounded by beautiful green plant life, is in the nuclear Exclusion Zone - too dangerous for people to live there. They've been evacuated.



They are allowed to return for no more than six hours at a time, between 9am and 3pm.

Japan was battered by an earthquake and tsunami in March 2011. That natural disaster led to another disaster at Tokyo Electric Power Company's Fukushima nuclear power plant. It was the world's worst nuclear accident since Chernobyl in 1986.

One of Tomioka's three zones is so dangerous with high radiation that people can visit only once a month. And that requires a special permit.

Among those who can visit for a few hours at a time on a daily basis is Sugihara Mochida, 71. He returns sometimes to clean his home, which he said is now infested with mice.

"We come back once in a while, but not for long. We are afraid of the effects of radiation on our health," said Sugihara. He carries a Geiger counter to measure the radiation levels in the air.

But Sugihara worries because he can't measure how radioactive the ground actually is.

'Kicked out' like a dog

From a distance, the scene in the field looks hopeful - farming equipment moving, men working.

But these men are not farmers. They're decontamination workers, gathering the top layer of soil and bagging it in large sacks. Then they move those sacks to a storage area in town. The sacks will be buried for decades, maybe centuries.

Caesium-137 is the radioactive isotope they're worried about, and it will take about 300 years for it to break down.

Daizuke Matusmara lived 80 of his 83 years here. He farmed rice and vegetables. He moved outside the Exclusion Zone. But he comes back regularly as the leader of a volunteer group that feeds abandoned animals.

"There's nobody here - just dogs and cattle," said Matsumara. Well, also an ostrich, which he is now taking care of.

"It was just wandering around," he said, watching the giant bird to make sure it didn't peck either one of us.

Matsumara said the government doesn't tell people much about what is going on, just that it's not safe for human beings.

Matsumara's true feelings boil to the surface for a split second when asked if he misses his lifelong home. "It's like when a dog is kicked out," he responded, spitting on the ground and looking away.

Exactly when Matsumara can return home permanently remains unknown. However, there is a bit of possible good news.



Researchers from Kyushu University planted some rice as an experiment. After they harvested it, they tested it to see how much radiation was in it. The level was very low, even though the radiation level of the soil was very high.

But there's still the contamination stigma of Fukushima that must be overcome.

"Of course, there is difference between something you **can eat** and something you **will buy**," said Kenji Kaneko, 56, another resident back for a few hours. "No one will buy anything grown in Fukushima."

Very slow progress

Signs of tsunami damage are still on houses, the fishing port, and damaged roads. But with



so much radioactive debris around, maybe a destroyed train station leading to a ghost town or a few dozen upturned cars isn't all that important.

Kazuo Shibata, 65, was heading to check out his cousin's liquor store.

"He's in temporary housing, but I don't know where he's staying right now. So I thought I'd come check on his shop," he said.

The government says they are working to decontaminate much of the Exclusion Zone. But if Shibata is unsure of where his own cousin is, it's hard to imagine how the government will



track him down - or track down owners - to get permission to decontaminate their property.

So what is the process? The town of Tomioka is an example.

Shinya Takehara, an official of Tomioka, said that so far only property owners south of the Tomioka River - which represents only one-third of the town's total area - have been contacted. Letters were sent asking if

they will allow workers to wash and decontaminate their homes and property.

Letters, not e-mails. And all Takehara knows is that the government sent the letters. That does not mean that the letters got there. It does not mean the addresses they used are any good.

"We are now trying to call these people and making appointments to explain the cleaning procedure," Takehara said.

So letters have been sent to 2,650 property owners. The town has only been able to actually talk with 25% of those. Almost all, once they talk to the city officials, agree to have their properties decontaminated.

According to Takehara, the few that don't want the decontamination done think it won't work.

Even if everyone signs on to have their homes hosed down and driveways scraped, the decontamination process has yet to begin because there are not enough trained workers.

Just to decontaminate Tomioka's two less dangerous zones will take around 3,000 workers. If they get that many workers, they can finish by the end of March 2017. So obviously, it will be a long process.

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