



Dispatches from the No-Go Zone 立ち入り禁止地帯からの特報 Aug. 15, 2011

By Pio d'Emilia

There are many other ways of spending time, but I find wandering around inside Fukushima Prefecture's supposedly sealed 20-kilometer "exclusion zone" has a special, although at times macabre, fascination.

The more time you spend inside, the more you get, somehow, addicted. That this beautiful region, crafted by dedicated farmers into one of the world's showcases for organic agriculture and eco-sustainable tourism, is becoming yet another example of nuclear devastation is difficult to swallow. Since March 11, I have entered the zone legally and illegally seven times, including one night-visit following a small team of female animal activists trying, at any cost, to save abandoned pets.

I've spent so much time there that I could easily guide a tour. I knew the region from before. Being a soccer fan and a lover of agritourism, I've visited the J-Village many times. I even organized there, right before the 2002 World Cup, the epoch-making clash between the FCCJ team and a group of lawmakers, which we won 3-1. I stayed in some beautiful bed-and-breakfast accommodation, which had been mushrooming in the region – until March.

It was especially painful to see the Soma Bokujo, a farm I once stayed at with friends, totally abandoned, raided by crows and pigs and rotting with a carpet of decomposed, liquefied corpses of cows. This disgusting sight should be enough in itself to immediately bring about the disbandment worldwide of the nuclear industry. It should also lead to the moral indictment, if not legal prosecution, for crimes against humanity of all those who have contributed to promoting, designing and building the plants – those who have offered kickbacks to profit from this lucrative, but socially devastating business.

I covered the tsunami tragedy from day one, and was among the first journalists to arrive in Kesenuma after a hair-raising eight-hour drive from Akita, where taxi drivers (who were much more cooperative than any authority, police included) helped me rent a car from an unlisted company.

I met Katsunobu Sakurai, the brave mayor of Minamisoma, without an appointment, at the city office around noon on April 1, after taking my first tour of the off-limits zone (it was not particularly well guarded. At the checkpoint, a policeman just asked who I was and why I was going inside, without checking my ID). I met Bill Powell, the Shanghai TIME correspondent, on his way out of the city hall. Assuming he had just met the mayor, I asked him for his first impressions. "I didn't meet him," Powell said. "He's busy." I took my chances anyway, asking his secretary for a brief meeting. To my surprise, the mayor agreed almost right away to meet me. Being born the same year means a lot in Japan – we found we both came into the world in 1954, and began a strong, personal friendship. Probably thanks to my long TV report that made him well known in Italy, many Italian institutions and private citizens have raised money for the reconstruction of Minamisoma.

Reconstruction implies that the present unclear situation will not, at least, become worse. Despite recent rumors of the government shrinking the no-go zone and even the possibility of an early return for evacuees, I'm afraid this is not the case. But I really hope the people of Minamisoma will be able to stay where they are, if not return to the evacuated zone.

I reached the main gate of the Fukushima Daiichi plant on my first journey inside the zone. I didn't see much, and I didn't bother stepping out of the car. The geiger counter showed 98 microsieverts/hour (three times the amount I measured at the same spot on July 12 – when I last went there embedded in a yakuza-provided minivan taking day workers to the plant) and I didn't want to risk of being held or questioned about my presence there.

was left. Houses were locked, convenience stores full of goods, ATMs ununused. Many people, most of them elderly, were still hiding out inside the zone, some of them with no visible protection. They were even willing to speak with a foreign journalist. The most common thing I heard was: "Why should we bother leaving? We are old, there is no way that such low radiation exposure could do us any harm. If I have to die, let me die on my own futon."

This is difficult to disagree with, especially if, then and even more now, there are places outside the zone where evacuation has been advised but not yet ordered – where radiation is much higher than inside most of the perimeter. In Iitate-mura, just a few meters from an inhabited home, I found a "hot spot" with ground-level radiation of up to 140 microsieverts/hour.

After the tightening of the entry ban on April 20 – a right and overdue decision – I didn't expect the total abandonment of the zone. I didn't expect everything to be left inside to rot with no sense of moral or ethical responsibility.

The scenario had totally changed when I went back inside in June and July with a formal permit issued by the Minamisoma office (even the brave, no-nonsense mayor had to work through thick layers of bureaucracy, eventually issuing a permit for a "survey," not "reporting").

You could encounter hundreds of cows enjoying total if ephemeral freedom after wandering away from farms. Pigs had started to enter abandoned homes, which despite the rush, had been cleaned and tidied by their owners. But most disgusting of all were the decomposing carcasses of hundreds of cows left unattended on farms. Months have passed, but I still can't get away from that revolting stink.

A sad-looking, young officer from the Minamisoma Agriculture, Fish and Forestry Department said this shameful situation stemmed from a central government decision, taken while local authorities were negotiating with farmers, to perform euthanasia on big livestock. It was wishful thinking. There was no follow up to the government order: no veterinarians, the only people allowed to put the animals down, could be found and there was no legally required cooperation from the animal owners. The situation is now "politically" frozen, but the hot weather is causing mass rotting. Unless the cows are able to reach "M-Bokujo," one of the 13 private farms owned by Seiji Murata, who refuses to kill a single animal and still manages to somehow take care of them, thousands are doomed to die and become supper for pigs and crows.

This is not the only sad thing. Houses have been robbed, convenience stores burgled, hospitals raided for drugs and ATMs smashed and emptied. A total of ¥200 million has been stolen inside the zone, some local media report, probably not by foreigners – who are usually blamed – but by local, disgruntled youngsters.

"If there wasn't much to do around here before the incident, there is nothing now," says T.M., a convicted "former" Sumiyoshikai yakuza who is one of the thousands of Tepco subcontractors. He supplies the plant with temporary cleaning workers, as well as cranes and machinery for debris disposal. He admits it's a good business.

"To dispose of the debris from a standard house, we charge about ¥1 million, with costs limited to ¥200,000-¥250,000," T.M. says. "We usually charge around ¥200,000 per worker per day to our direct client (this is not Tepco; there are at least another couple of companies in-between). But the worker, at the end of the day, gets less than a third of this.

"You may think we are making too much profit, but trust me, we are getting just a small slice of the cake. Nothing compares to the huge money that American and French companies, like Areva, make for their useless machines!"

Like all yakuza, T.M. is – or at least pretends to be – a socially motivated man of honor. Not only does he show us around, totally unchecked, inside J-Village, he drives us to the plant and sets up evening meetings with workers. He takes us around for a whole day, suggesting stories and trying to accommodate our wishes. He shows us the house in Naraha-machi where a whole family has refused to evacuate, and takes us to his family grave, where we pay our respects to his ancestors.

He shows us what he calls a shameful place: Futaba Hospital in Okuma, where the entire staff, including doctors and nurses, reportedly left the day of the tsunami, abandoning the mostly elderly patients. According to Kyodo News, 14 patients, who were rescued two days later, died on the bus taking them to another hospital.

But there are also signs of human kindness, and unexpected hope. Odaka, once a city with a population of 12,000, is still totally abandoned – just as the tsunami left it. My good friend and photographer Pierpaolo Mittica, who has already published a book on Chernobyl, is shooting there for a new book on Fukushima. A book, he says, he never imagined he would have to do. On a visit there on July 12, we hear noises. A group of workers, with no protection at all, is packing up for the day. They have been privately hired to fix the roof of a house. "We don't even know the owner," says one. "We got the assignment over the phone. 'Please fix the roof, so the rain does not get inside.' He paid ¥300,000 in advance. We just finished."

It's difficult to imagine Odaka, where at night the streetlights are amazingly still on (the city has a contract with Tohoku Denryoku, Tepco's competitor) getting back to normal anytime soon. But the idea that somebody has spent money to fix a roof there is reassuring. And, I must admit, it moved us both to tears on leaving.

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