



Reports from Tohoku: Assessing Death, Dislocation, and Flight of the Victims

東北より--被害者の死亡、退去、離散の算定

Mar. 20, 2011

By Matthew Penney -- **LATEST UPDATE 3.30 (Japan Time)** -- The extent of the destruction caused by the March 11 earthquake and tsunami in Japan has shocked the world. An official [report](#) on the 20th listed over 8277 dead and 12722 missing – a great majority in the hardest hit areas of northern Japan. The “dead” are the number of the bodies found by police and rescue workers. The “missing” are those reported missing by friends and family. With whole communities swallowed by the tsunami, there is a strong chance that many victims simply have no one left to report them missing. The situation for [survivors](#) in the quake-hit areas around the stricken Fukushima Daiichi atomic energy plant has been particularly dire as many have been unable to leave their homes.

While the nuclear crisis has tended to monopolize international attention, new information continues to flow from evacuation centers and isolated areas concerning the humanitarian crisis in the Tohoku region. This report brings together a variety of recent Japanese press accounts in order to give a broader picture of the issues facing those in the areas hardest hit by the quake and tsunami. According to Japanese government [reports](#), 392,000 evacuees are housed in over 2200 locations as of the 19th. While numbers as high as 500,000 were reported in the international press in the days following the earthquake, this seems to have been an unconfirmed figure based on a Japanese government estimate of 500,000 homeless shortly after the quake.

Iwate and surrounding prefectures have been hit by snow and unseasonable below freezing temperatures, exacerbating the situation of many in both evacuation centers and homes that lack electric power. The horrifying death toll has led to difficulty in identifying and storing bodies. In major centers with intact infrastructure like Sendai, they are being kept for identification at gymnasiums. Because of a severe shortage of gasoline, city authorities there have begun to run a free bus service so that bereaved families can [identify](#) loved ones. In harder hit areas of Miyagi, prefectural authorities have given [permission](#) for the burial of corpses (cremation is the norm in Japan) in order to prevent a public health crisis.

There are [indications](#) of leaps forward in the provision of supplies and infrastructure in towns that were devastated like Iwate's Rikuzen Takada. The assembly of temporary housing (there are plans to complete 300 units that could house 600-900 people in the immediate area and thousands more elsewhere in Iwate prefecture) began there on the 19th. The first units are expected to be completed by the end of March. This is likely to significantly relieve crowding in shelters in the medium term. Some have taken up residence in temples, shops and other locations and there are widespread [assertions](#) that local residents, even the elderly, are not waiting to be saved but proactively gathering provisions and firewood in areas without generators. There are also reports of intact kerosene stoves, very common in Japan, being used all over.

The over 100,000 troops who have been mobilized have thus far focused their efforts first on search and rescue and then on evacuation, but are now gearing up for [accelerated delivery](#) of food, fuel, and medicine. Large scale relief efforts are moving greater and greater amounts of material into the afflicted areas. Around midday on the 19th, a large Maritime Self Defense Force supply ship [arrived](#) in Sendai with essential supplies such as rations and kerosene. The US Navy has also [delivered](#) over 100,000 pounds of supplies.

Areas like Rikuzen Takada are described as “towns”, but a history of recent amalgamation means that they encompass large areas that until recently included many distinct rural communities. Rikuzen Takada, for example, is an area of 232 square kilometers and while help has gotten to the most densely populated zones, small hamlets remain cut off because of destroyed roads and severed lines of communication. Hopeful messages have been coming from some cut off areas, however. Residents of an isolated area of the Ojika Peninsula in Miyagi, approximately 1200 in number, managed to get word to a passing Fisheries Agency supply ship that they are unhurt. This appeared in the [press](#) on the 19th. They have been supplied with food and kerosene.

Isolated groups are also putting up SOS signs and clearing areas for helicopter landing. Around Ishinomaki, survivors [report](#) that they had salvaged provisions and dealt with the cold by huddling together at night. Most of these areas are fishing villages. Developed survival skills are the norm. Some areas also have [working boats](#), which have helped to improve the situation for many.

Far from centers of commerce in the best of times, most of the isolated areas are small fishing or farming communities. During the crisis, women have cooked for large groups while men collect firewood and gather supplies, as described [here](#). Strong rural community ties are seeing many through the crisis. While there is no doubt a measure of media spin involved, stories of residents in cut off areas describing themselves as “one big family” in the face of crisis are numerous across the [accounts](#) of reporters who have made it to isolated areas.

While we can only speculate about the full picture at this point, some reports of dead and missing coming out of tiny hamlets are far lower than in larger centers. For example, 20 of 200 are [reported](#) dead or missing in tiny Todogasaki compared to over half of the population of Minami Sanriku's 17,000 people. Todogasaki, a hamlet about 30km from Miyako in Iwate, was hit hard. Even the primary school designated as an evacuation site was destroyed. Roads and bridges linking with Miyako were washed out. The tragic but still strikingly low toll, however, speaks to the strength of ties and corresponding speed of action in a place where literally everybody knows everybody. After an organized response to tragedy, the people there set up search parties to look for the missing and to gather provisions and necessary resources. When the road was reopened five days after the quake, kerosene for heating and other supplies began to make their way in. Nevertheless, as of the 18th, [reports](#) describe over 15,000 people cut off around the region, without electricity or transportation and presumably in dire need of basic supplies.

Priority has been placed on reaching isolated hospitals. An emergency medical [rescue team](#) from Osaka managed to move 100 patients from a hospital in Miyagi's Ishinomaki on the 18th. Stories from devastated hospitals like this one include accounts of patients dying in the immediate aftermath of the quake, but also of doctors and nurses working frantically to save lives.

The areas devastated on the 11th are also some of the most rapidly aging in Japan. The presence of large numbers of elderly, including bedridden survivors, has made rescue efforts all the more difficult. Near Fukushima, [dialysis patients](#) were moved out first, followed by a general effort to evacuate the oldest victims from quake hit areas. Unfortunately, because of limited resources, their families are unable to accompany them.

Offers to assist the displaced are coming from all over Japan. Ordinary people have offered rooms in their homes. But a critical problem in many cases is transportation. [Okinawa](#) has said that it can take tens of thousands, although this may be unrealistic, given the logistics. [Kanagawa](#) prefecture plans to take thousands and is currently preparing high school gymnasiums and other facilities as a temporary solution for housing refugees. [Akita](#) prefecture has already started taking people. [Gunma](#) prefecture is using local hotels as well as public facilities. [Niigata](#) is focusing on the relocation of dialysis patients from the Fukushima area. Thousands are being evacuated from Fukushima to [Saitama](#). While we do not yet have a clear picture of the movement of people, an area as far off as [Kumamoto](#) in Kyushu is undergoing preparations to take 20 pregnant women and their families from the quake hit zone. Prefectures across quake-spared Western Japan are preparing to take tens of thousands of evacuees. Public housing, hotels, public facilities, gymnasiums, and stadiums are all being considered as short and long term solutions according to various [reports](#).

Finally, there are [indications](#) that the supply situation across the entire region has improved. With fuel, basic provisions, and essential medicines arriving in major evacuation centers, efforts are being stepped up to complement them with vegetables as well as other daily items such as diapers and cold medicine. [Reports](#) of supplies being moved in continue to come from the most isolated areas.

UPDATE 1: 2:30 AM, March 21 (Japan) / 1:30 PM, March 20 (EST)

Food and other supplies are being sent from as far away as [Oita](#), approximately 1000 kilometers to the south west of the quake hit region. Urgent [repairs](#) are going on at quake hit ports. Repairs to infrastructure will make it easier to land supplies. The [Sankei Newspaper](#) is reporting widespread repairs to roads and other infrastructure, making it far easier to get supplies into quake-hit zones.

The Sankei raises another problem, however: "People have been able to endure life in evacuation shelters because they are with people they know, people who speak the same way [a reference to the unique dialect of the quake hit areas as well as shared experience], their community." Moving them "willy nilly" to different parts of the country, the Sankei editors hold, could compound trauma, and they call on the government to carefully coordinate the coming nationwide movement of survivors.

These concerns can be contrasted with a more urgent tone earlier in the week when the Sankei [reported](#) bitter cold in shelters, even water freezing inside pipes in a shelter around Sendai.

Major papers reported the threat of an influenza outbreak on the 15th and 16th. The lack of follow-up reporting suggests that this has not taken place. [Reports](#) had several cases diagnosed as of the 15th in Iwate's Kamaishi, but patients were isolated and the outbreak appears to have been contained. Reports also suggest that masks are being widely distributed.

As the provision of necessary supplies to the north has improved, other important measures are being taken. The website of [NHK](#) is hosting a searchable database of all evacuees in Japanese and six other languages.

As of the 20th, thousands of residents of the area around the damaged Fukushima plant have been evacuated to Saitama, Tokyo, and Kanagawa ([here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)). Hundreds of local volunteers are assisting and evacuees are reporting far better food and general conditions.

Companies have [donated](#) over 2000 drums of heating oil to add to government supplies. This is currently being delivered to shelters and evacuation areas by the JSDF.

PR or a sign of stable supply? The [Yomiuri](#) reports that female JSDF troops are supplying women in cut off areas with hygiene products by helicopter.

UPDATE 2: 8:00 AM, March 21 (Japan) / 7:00 PM, March 20 (EST)

Tweets from the afflicted regions provide a different point of view from the mainstream press:

dj_azumi in Sendai: (around midnight on the 20th) Suggests that those who have chosen to stay in their homes rather than evacuate are not able to receive food or heating fuel as the shelters are being given priority.

clavius (Ichikawa Yuichi) currently in the disaster area: (evening of the 20th) Reports stories of robberies and at least one sexual assault in Ofunato. Also reports that Docomo cellular phone service has been restored over large areas.

According to Tokyo University scholar and feminist Ueno Chizuko's twitter (**ueno_wan**; evening of the 20th) she has received reports from doctors working in the quake-hit areas of deaths of elderly in shelters that do not appear to have been reported in the press yet. Ueno opened her account fewer than 12 hours ago and already has over 2000 followers.

Compiling the results of [interviews](#) on the evening of the 20th, the Yomiuri has put together a list of the items that evacuees most want. The list includes:

- Shoes (many arrived at shelters with shoes that were soaked through)
- Phones and satellite connections to arrange the movement of patients to other hospitals
- Help distributing the supplies that are arriving
- Gasoline or assistance in getting to areas where bodies are being kept for identification
- Dry ice to preserve bodies so that they can be properly cremated later

A Mainichi [survey](#) of the individuals in charge of evacuation sites in Iwate, Miyagi, and Fukushima highlights persistent problems. Stress, nausea, and colds are prevalent. Toilets are unclean and evacuees lack changes of clothes and underwear. Diarrhea is also spreading while medicines of all types are in short supply. There are worries about food poisoning because of difficulty cleaning. While food is getting through, people at many shelters have only received hot food once every few days. There are reports of fights (no indication if these are verbal or physical) because of tight space and difficulty sleeping at some shelters.

The [Tokyo Shimbun](#) reports that in Miyagi, bodies that have not been identified are being buried for later identification. Personal items will be kept separately to facilitate the process. Miyagi authorities have over 5000 bodies, approximately 80% of which have not been identified. The newspaper has also run an [interview](#) with Takeuchi Naoto, Miyagi's chief of police. He reports that approximately 1000 bodies are being recovered every day. He estimates the number of dead in Miyagi prefecture alone to be more than 15,000.

At the same time that this grim news appeared, however, the Nikkei (3.21) offered a detailed look at life in a primary school turned shelter in Miyagi's Higashi Matsushima. Electricity has been reconnected but not water. Food is described as poor. Despite this, however, evacuees have come together to make the best of their situation. Evacuees are divided by classroom (20-30 to a room) and have elected leaders as well as representatives in charge of distribution of food and cleaning. Older children have organized workshops to make toys for the younger. The evacuees are supported by volunteers from the surrounding area which was largely untouched by the tsunami. Across the region, conditions appear to vary dramatically between different shelters.

UPDATE 3: 9:00 PM, March 21 (Japan) / 8:00 AM, March 21 (EST)

According to the Nikkei on the evening of the 21st, Iwate prefectural authorities have announced that lines of contact and supply have been established with all isolated communities along the tsunami hit coast. Through last week, over 10,000 people in 194 locations were cut off. Most were supplied by helicopter and now all are reachable by road. In addition, nearly all areas of Miyagi, the hardest hit prefecture, have been [reached](#). The [Japan Press Network](#) is reporting that with roads cleared or repaired, the biggest issue facing area residents is a lack of gasoline, making civilians reliant on JSDF support for food and other necessities. They also [report](#), however, that the movement of fuel into the quake-hit region has accelerated considerably over the weekend, raising the possibility that many civilians will soon be able to move about on their own. In particular, repairs to [ports](#), [roads](#), and [rail](#) networks are making the large scale movement of fuel and other supplies much easier.

On the evening of the 21st the [Yomiuri](#) presented a full picture of the evacuation of Fukushima residents from the radiation danger zone. A total of 22,700 have been evacuated. 7800 are housed in 77 locations in Niigata, 3700 in 57 locations in Yamagata, 3600 in 36 locations in Saitama, and 3000 in 56 locations in Tochigi.

Reports from Otsuchi in Iwate in the [Asahi](#) on the 21st suggest a region-wide problem. Shelters are full and some refugees are forced to sleep in their cars. While they receive food at the shelter, one family of four reports huddling together under blankets in the night, only occasionally able to use the heater because of a lack of fuel. The paper also reports that during the Niigata quake of 2004, there were deaths due to blood clots (the same "Economy Class Syndrome" sometimes seen on airplanes) and warns that countermeasures are necessary.

On Twitter, [hinoki123](#), a Juku manager from Osaka with over 20,000 followers, is launching a campaign to send picture books and manga as well as school supplies to children in shelters. Through the crisis, Twitter has not only been a source of alternative information, but a site of mobilization. [Peace Boat](#) has been using Twitter to call for volunteers. American Ambassador Roos ([AmbassadorRoos](#)) has announced on twitter that the Marine Toys for Tots foundation has already delivered 1500 toys to children in shelters.

UPDATE 4: 9:00 AM, March 22 (Japan) / 8:00 PM, March 21 (EST)

"Please contact me", "I'm okay", "I evacuated to a relative's house". The thousands of messages posted around Tohoku have been the only way that many victims were able to get word to loved ones. This has reminded many of similarly dramatic images of shelter walls covered with hastily written, often desperate appeals in the aftermath of the 1995 Kobe quake. The [Mainichi](#) asks why, in 2011, cellular phones were not reliable in the emergency and reports that damage to infrastructure as well as an explosion of use immediately after the quake simply overwhelmed the three major carriers - Docomo, AU, and Softbank. Service has now been restored over much of the region, but the Mainichi asks whether the rapid decline in the number of public telephones over the last decade - from 730,600 in 2000 to only 283,000 in 2010 - created a vulnerability that added to confusion and heartache in the aftermath of the quake.

The medical team from [Israel](#) is [describing](#) an acute shortage of "ordinary" medicine for the common cold, flu, and fever. They report that most seriously ill or injured patients have been evacuated from the quake-hit region, but that new medical challenges - such as staying off cold and flu in crowded and chilly shelters - have yet to be adequately met. The [Asahi](#) also plays up how ordinary medical problems can become acute. Doctors report patients complaining of severe constipation because of poor food and stress, Dehydration and a lack of exercise are making this and other similar problems more serious for some.

Meanwhile, the [Sankei](#) is reporting that evacuees to less hard hit areas like Mito are enjoying their first baths in 10 days. A 62 year old salaryman describes it as "like coming back to life."

In an editorial, the [Mainichi](#) plays up just how much of the support in the north is not coming from centrally directed initiatives but rather prefectural and municipal governments and local organizations mobilizing all of Japan. They call, however, for central organization to make sure that the right aid goes to the right place - especially in the provision of medicine and evacuation for emergency treatment.

UPDATE 5: 9:30 AM, March 23 (Japan) / 8:30 PM, March 22 (EST)

The Asahi [reports](#) that locals in formerly cut-off areas in Miyagi's Ishinomori have expressed anger toward the press. On the 16th, a fisherman confronted Kobe-based reporters Ono Daisuke and Ota Narumi: "If you bastards came all the way from Kobe, why didn't you bring some damn food with you!?" The sense that journalists are exploiting the tragedy exists in the earthquake-hit area.

Even on the 22nd some areas around Ishinomaki are not receiving adequate supplies. Locals [speculate](#) that despite the fact that roads have been cleared, a lack of fuel means that provisions are not getting through. On the morning of the 22nd, a family would have received a loaf of bread, one cup noodle, and a 500 milliliter bottle of water for the day.

The Mainichi [reports](#) the presence of doctors and nurses from the quake-hit areas in many of the shelters who are able to help with care and with counselling. There are even reports (Nikkei, March 22) of local dentists in Rikuzen Takada giving free treatment to evacuees. Japanese [midwives](#) are providing online counselling for pregnant women and nursing mothers in shelters, advice duplicated in the major daily [newspapers](#).

In order to help [alleviate](#) shortages of medicine in Tohoku, the Japan Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association, an association of major companies, announced that it has teamed with the Japan Medical Association to send 10 tons of medicine to the devastated regions. Medicines shipped include antibiotics, blood pressure medicine, and medicines for the treatment of diabetes. The medicine is in the process of being moved by American military aircraft to Sendai and nearby airports. From there it will be distributed directly to shelters.

Many evacuees report constant stress about the future reconstruction of their communities. The government has tried to bring a sense of stability and hope by announcing that they are [considering](#) forming a "Reconstruction Agency" directly under cabinet control. Another area of unease is the effect of a lengthy stay in shelters on children's education. There are already, however, [reports](#) of moves to establish temporary schools at shelters.

Evacuees who have been moved out of hard hit areas report tremendous generosity. In Niigata, refugees from Soma in Fukushima prefecture are eating [French food](#) prepared by local chefs. Even in some of the hardest hit areas, necessary infrastructure is improving and small luxuries becoming possible. In Kesennuma in Miyagi, the Self Defense Forces have set up a bath house adjacent to one of the main shelters. Evacuees receive three meals a day, do "radio exercise" in the morning, and have access to a variety of special services. Residents [testify](#) that the food is fine, but some medicines are in short supply. Other things that they want - hot water bottles, fresh vegetables, gasoline or phone access so that they can try to contact loved ones.

UPDATE 6: 11:30 PM, March 24 (Japan) / 10:30 AM, March 24 (EST)

A police [announcement](#) on the evening of the 24th placed the number of dead at 9737 and missing at 16,423. The combined total of dead and missing is 26,160.

[Reports](#) indicate that space is being prepared for the move of elderly and disabled evacuees out of the quake zone. Hokkaido has announced that room has been prepared for 2414 in elder care homes and facilities for the disabled. Similar moves are being taken nationwide. Hokkaido is also preparing for a large scale dispatch of hundreds of care workers and medical professionals. Other prefectures such as [Gunma](#) have also begun the process of dispatching care workers to assist elderly quake and tsunami victims in the north.

According to the Nikkei on the 24th, Tokyo has secured the 700 rooms of the [Grand Prince Hotel Akasaka](#) (soon to close for business reasons) which are expected to house approximately 1600 evacuees.

More volunteers are making it to shelters. In Miyagi, professional [masseurs](#) are offering their services to evacuees while [Jiji](#) reports the establishment of schools and kindergartens at shelters.

A [survey](#) of 500 evacuees carried out in 12 areas of Iwate prefecture offers a more complete look at the situation in shelters. Answers reflect general press accounts that provision of food and water has dramatically improved this week. The "difficulty" most frequently cited by evacuees is the lack of bathing facilities (25.2%) followed by laundry (15.7%). A lack of information, especially about the missing, and health are other major concerns. The article also reports that bath and shower facilities have been established at 8 of the larger shelters with more to go up in the coming days.

With the food and heating situations far improved at many shelters, evacuees [express](#) a desire for ordinary everyday items like razors and soap. Evacuees also [cite](#) a lack of cash as one of their major concerns. In order to address this problem, Japan Post, which runs a bank and nationwide ATM service, has begun to serve shelters in Miyagi and Iwate with "mobile post offices".

Miyagi prefecture [expects](#) to complete 1000 housing units by the end of April. It is expected that around 20,000 will be needed for the prefecture's 110,000 evacuees. Estimates for completion of units for all evacuees range from six months to over a year.

As a [temporary solution](#) to crowding in shelters, Iwate has also begun the movement of some evacuees from the hard hit coastal regions to the interior where hotel rooms for 10,000 have already been secured. More adequate fuel supplies and the clearing and repair of roads is making it possible to move more people out as supplies move in.

Many, however, are expressing a desire to stay in the places they know, despite the devastation. The [Mainichi](#) quotes Goto Yoshio (70) who says: "Men of the sea can only live by the sea. Many people are saying that they don't want to leave the prefecture, they want to stay here and start again from zero." Endo Katsuhiko (63) in Miyagi is falling between a desire to move and a desire to preserve community: "We just can't live here anymore. But everyone around me is someone that I have known since I was little. If they can move us all together, I wouldn't mind going to another prefecture."

The [Yomiuri](#) has published comprehensive statistics that make the medical situation in the wake of the earthquake and tsunami clearer. These statistics include both injuries as a result of the disaster, the treatment of individuals with existing conditions, and those evacuated from medical facilities who received treatment elsewhere:

Serious - 1340

Moderate - 3630

Light - 8340

Deaths - 169

UPDATE 7: 9:00 PM, March 25 (Japan) / 8:00 AM, March 25 (EST)

On the 25th, the [Kahoku Shimpō](#) drew attention to the plight of survivors who have not evacuated to shelters. Most are without power or running water. Many are able to receive only one meal a day as priority is given to people registered in shelters. In areas like Ishinomaki, food and fuel is not coming in through ordinary commercial channels and what food was left in people's homes is running low. Distributors of emergency relief are [struggling](#) to keep up, with many residents eating between one and two times a day. The situation in larger areas such as Sendai is much better, but getting provisions and necessary items to the most needy is still a serious problem.

The media is striking a balance between reporting on critical shortages and more happy stories. [Gakken](#), a major publisher of children's books, is making free e-books available online to help children in the shelters. This one <http://ebook.gakken.jp/gstore/pdf/201103hoiku.pdf> teaches a range of games that can be played without toys. There are also [stories](#) of locals outside of the quake-hit region helping evacuees by opening their homes and allowing them to use the bath.

UPDATE 8: March 26 (Japan)

As of the morning of the 26th, the latest [reports](#) put the number of dead and missing at over 27,000.

The [Yomiuri](#) reports that efforts are being stepped up to provide food and other aid to disaster hit individuals and families who have stayed in their own homes instead of evacuating to shelters.

[Asahi Television](#) highlights the fact that little progress has been made in identifying bodies of quake and tsunami victims in Miyagi. The report also explains that individuals without family or whose family also died in the disaster are not yet being counted among the missing, only people who have been officially reported "missing" to the authorities.

[FNN](#) shows the first applicants for spots in temporary housing in Iwate's Rikuzen Takada. There have been over 200 applications for just 36 spots and local authorities have decided on a lottery system with half of the total going to elderly and disabled applicants and half going to families. FNN [also](#) reports that because of low temperatures and rain, as well as the strain of communal living, many evacuees are suffering from stress or medical problems. They also state, however, that power and water service has been restored to 40-50% in hard hit Kasenuma, suggesting that some evacuees will be able to return to less damaged homes. A [NHK](#) interview, however, captures a continuing sense of uncertainty, quoting a 70 year old evacuee: "I've got no job, no income, and no home, I can't even imagine what my future will be like."

UPDATE 9: March 27 (Japan)

On the 27th, free gasoline distribution began in areas of Iwate prefecture. 20 liters of gas are [expected](#) to be given to 2000 locals over the next 3 days. Video is available here from [FNN](#).

[Sponichi](#) reports that plans are underway to move some of Miyagi's 9400 evacuees out of shelters in the immediate disaster area and house them in hotels and public facilities in neighboring areas until infrastructure is restored and temporary housing constructed. Food, clothing, and even school transfers for children have already been arranged. The [Japan Press Network](#) reports that children who have evacuated from around the TEPCO plant to other areas of Fukushima prefecture are already being accepted into new schools.

[Jiji](#) reports describe families and individuals who have not been able to evacuate to shelters. For example, a family with a severely autistic child, likely to have panic attacks in a crowded shelter, has not evacuated, nor have they received rations or other support. They call for more comprehensive support plans for the disabled in times of crisis.

Some areas around the stricken Fukushima nuclear plant are receiving adequate supply while others are not. The [Asahi](#) highlights how while large hospitals and other public facilities are receiving medicine and other types of material support, small-scale care homes and similar establishments are not. Elderly in the "voluntary" evacuation zone are hesitant or unable to move and worry that supplies of necessary medicine, not to mention food and heating fuel, will run out.

UPDATE 10: March 28 (Japan)

As the situation in Iwate and Miyagi shelters improves and construction of temporary housing begins, these updates will focus on the situation in Fukushima prefecture. Many Fukushima residents have been evacuated to areas such as Saitama which were not significantly damaged in the quake. As a result, they have enjoyed better food and access to medical care and other services since the crisis began. In Fukushima, however, it is not a simple matter of "rebuilding" as radiation threatens to taint the soil and destroy livelihoods. Also important is the health and safety of those who have stayed behind, some of whom are just outside the largely arbitrary 20km evacuation radius established by the government.

For a first hand report from Fukushima, please see David McNeill's ["In the Shadow of Japan's Wounded Nuclear Beast"](#).

The [Asahi](#) reports that many residents around the Fukushima plant have been left confused and angered by unclear government directives. Many wonder if "voluntary evacuation" will make them ineligible for compensation and support. Others found inadequate preparations at shelters and moved from hotel to hotel. Many initially left without insurance, banking, or other important documents. Farmers have had to leave livestock with no indication if they will be able to get food and water to them. There are reports of some individuals refusing to evacuate because of concern for their animals. The government is now being criticized from a variety of corners for its initial decision to tell residents between 20-30 km from the plant to stay indoors. In March 27th editorial, for example, [Ryukyu Shimpo](#) asks if the current "voluntary evacuation" directive is an admission that the earlier order was wrong.

What evacuees want most is information, but little has been forthcoming. Fukushima governor Sato Yuhei has [discussed](#) compensation to Fukushima residents and especially to farmers, with Minister of Education, Science, and Technology Takagi Yoshiaki, but plans have not yet been made public. Communist Party members have [revealed](#) in Diet debate that there has been at least one suicide of a Fukushima area farmer since the ban on the sale of area produce. Ministry of Fisheries, Forestry, and Agriculture officials are investigating various compensation schemes. Meanwhile, Fukushima prefecture is [ordering](#) farmers to put off planting crops indefinitely. Local farmers are on the verge of panic. One reports, "I am worried about radiation, but if I can't plant, I can't live. I have many friends who are worried about whether or not we are going to be able to plant at all this year." Fukushima has been one of Japan's most agriculturally productive prefectures (4th in the country for rice output), and the Fukushima Daiichi disaster will affect the lives of many. Some, especially older farmers, [worry](#) if they will ever be able to work their land again.

Some Fukushima elderly face as great a risk from abrupt evacuation as they do from current levels of radiation. Just how the elderly and infirm are expected to "voluntarily evacuate" or even move from the most severely effected areas has been left up in the air, but there have been efforts by neighbouring prefectures to assist. The [Asahi](#) reports that Tokyo has sent ambulances and rescue teams to assist with the movement of people from the 20-30 km radius.

UPDATE 11: March 30 (Japan)

On the 28th, [NHK](#) reported a significant increase in the number of residents who evacuated from the 20-30km zone around Fukushima Daiichi only to later return to their homes. Residents of this area are recommended to stay in their homes to prevent increased radiation exposure. Local governments are demanding that the central government step up the provision of food, medicine, and necessary items to support people in the area as commercial channels have shut down and there are still reports of key supplies not getting through.

[Asahi Television](#) reports confusion among area residents who have been given directives to "stay indoors" amid calls for "voluntary evacuation". Residents are quoted as saying "We just want them to make it clear." Some state that they could give up on their homes and fields if the government would simply tell them that the area is too dangerous.

On the 26th, the Nikkei called the "voluntary evacuation" idea "overly vague" and sure to spread confusion rather than confidence in the government response. They also report, however, that the government has made efforts, such as the dispatch of firefighters and ambulances, to aid those who wish to leave. Despite these provisions, however, there are reports that as many as 20,000 people are still in the 20-30km area.

The [Yomiuri](#) reported on the 28th that there were even people returning to homes *inside* the 20km evacuation area. Individuals return for clothing, papers, cash, or valuables. Some have returned to stay, resigned to remain in their homes and communities despite the threat. The government has tried to discourage this, but people are still slipping through. Other [reports](#) have JSDF troops checking houses within the evacuation zone and trying to convince people to leave. Some have simply refused to evacuate, others are staying for livestock, or pets which at present are not allowed in shelters. Soldiers and officials on site are not legally able to force the remaining people to leave.

The evacuation from the region of the Fukushima Daiichi plant has been difficult for many. On the 29th, the [Asahi](#) recounted the story of a group of 200 mentally handicapped children and young people. They and their caretakers were forced to flee from an institution just five kilometers from the disaster site. They have already moved between three temporary shelters and stress and confusion are taking a heavy toll as caretakers report that they are at their limit.

While the [Mainichi](#) reports that the government plans to expedite provisional compensation payments to farmers whose livelihoods are threatened by the Fukushima disaster, reports of a suicide of an area farmer have been confirmed. In a powerful statement suggesting a collective responsibility for supporting nuclear power while ignoring its potentially devastating effects, [satounaotou](#) a prolific tweeter, posted on his Twitter account: "I offer a silent prayer for the Fukushima farmer who died. It was we who killed him."

Amid myriad scenes of tragedy, scenes of horror are also being [reported](#) from around the Fukushima Daiichi site. Because of elevated radiation, workers have been unable to collect and bury bodies. There are reports of corpses, at least one of which was found to be heavily contaminated with radiation, simply left where they lie. This news must be horrifying for families and could be the harbinger of a different public health crisis given the thousands missing in the region.

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