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In the Shadow of Japan's Wounded Nuclear Beast
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原子力発電所という手負いの獣の陰で

By David McNeill -- Tetsuo Sakuma has loaded his small pickup with all it can carry. There's not much of value: a television, some books, boxes of clothes, snatched in haste from a home he may never sleep in again. "We hope to come back, but it's difficult to tell when," he says.

As he talks, he glances toward a hulking suite of concrete buildings nestling behind trees about two kilometers away. The Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant has driven him out of the house he has lived in all his life.

"We're rented an apartment in Iwaki," explains his grown-up son Takashi. He says hundreds of people from the area have moved to the city about 30 km away, on the borderline of the government-designated evacuation perimeter. "Almost everyone has gone," adds Tetsuo, tightening a rope around his belongings. "We only came back to get our stuff. The hardest thing is not knowing when we will return."

Around us, Okumamachi has all the appearance of a typical Japanese town. There's a post office with its bright red sign, a couple of convenience stores and a petrol station. Shiny police cars are lined up outside the Futaba Police Station, two smiley cartoon faces beckon customers into the Mister Tire-Man garage; a huge gaudy sign advertises the Tsubame Pachinko Parlour. All that's missing from Okumamachi is people.

In their place, dogs roam the streets, abandoned by their owners. Alien figures in radiation suits, gas masks and respirators peer from passing vehicles. A police car slows and the two masks inside tell the Sakumas, father and son, to get quickly to safety. "It's dangerous here. Please take shelter, for your own sake."

Three weeks ago, this picture-postcard farming region, 250 km northeast of Tokyo, was going about its business. When the March 11 quake came, it tore up bridges and roads, toppled houses and triggered a colossal tsunami. That was but a prelude to what followed as the twin disaster knocked out the Fukushima plant's cooling systems, the start of a nightmare from which this sleepy region has yet to awake.

When the explosions at the complex began, the government declared a 20km evacuation zone around the plant, telling another 140,000 people living in the zone 20-30km away to seal themselves indoors. The declaration was considered arbitrary, unscientific, even callous. "The government is leaving us to die," an emotional local mayor in Minamisoma told the media.

Government spokesman Yukio Edano gave what was seen as conflicting statements on the dangers. Supplies stopped coming as deliverymen refused to drive into the area, shops closed, government officials began driving around in protective suits. Those locals who had the means to leave did. Many old, poor and ill people stayed.

Last Friday, the Prime Minister's Office finally issued a voluntary evacuation order to residents in the 20-30km zone, after earlier admitting that radiation levels in some areas outside 30km could exceed 100 millisieverts, a level considered dangerous over a period of more than 24 hours. The order was sent quietly the previous night "to avoid confusion" said Kyodo News. "I'm not confused, I'm just scared," says Takashi Sakuma. "You can't see radiation."

On the drive up toward the Fukushima plant, buses carrying about half a dozen men in white radiation gear travel in the opposite direction. Technicians battling to bring the plant under control can only work for short periods before being withdrawn and sent for decontamination. Yesterday, Japan's nuclear watchdog said the level of radiation near Reactor Two is now 1,000 millisieverts an hour. Exposure of 100 millisieverts a year in considered a cancer risk.

In the shadow of the plant, the few local people who venture back to the area in cars to pick up their belongings wear pollen masks – akin to wearing socks while walking over hot coals. Some carry Geiger counters. "The reading now is 56 millisieverts," says Masaru Onuki, who has slowed and rolled down his window to warn me of the most dangerous area further along the coast, where he has detected 69 microsieverts or more. "It's ok, as long as you don't stay too long."

Until March 11, visitors to the plant would have driven up to the reception center, which is surrounded by trees blocking it off from the six reactors. On the glass doors, two cartoon characters would have welcomed them inside for a talk by operator Tokyo Electric Power (TEPCO) on the 40-year-old plant's safety record. The quake has broken the glass door and driven a crack through the wall sign advertising the center. While I'm photographing it, a security guard in a protective suit approaches. "You can't come here," he says. "Where is your suit?" I don't have one, I tell him. "You must leave the area."

According to experts in the area, the radioactivity is not evenly spread in circles: there are places outside the 30 km zone that are more radioactive than inside. "In some places between 30-50km from the reactor, the reading was above 100 microsieverts per hour," says Jan Vande Putte, Greenpeace International's radiation expert who is part of a team monitoring the outskirts of the evacuation zone. "You were irradiated but if you didn't spend too much time it is OK at the current radiation levels. But if something goes really wrong inside the plant you have a chance not to survive it."

How far before it is safe? The road away winds into the mountains and eventually arrives at a town called Tamura-shi, between 20-30km away from the crippled plant. It too is eerily quiet, a Marie Céleste for the atomic age. Hironobu Matsumoto and his son Makoto drive another pickup down the empty main street. "Almost everybody left after the earthquake," recalls Makoto. "We can't because we have a sick old person inside our house who can't be moved. But there aren't many like us. It's difficult to know when they'll be back. I mean, who knows what will happen to the nuclear plant?"

Outside the deserted police station, another local man stops his car to talk. Kingo Watanabe (86) has been here since March 11, and isn't moving. Isn't he afraid of the radiation? "Compared to what happened in the war (World War 2), I'm not afraid," he says. When the Americans bombed Tokyo, he was in the army, assigned to shoot them down with aircraft guns. The Americans kept coming. "We lived through Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the radiation then was far worse. I'll live through this."

David McNeill writes from Tokyo for *The Independent*, *The Irish Times* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. He is an *Asia-Pacific Journal* coordinator.

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