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Bodies in Fukushima
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福島における遺体

By Matthew Penney -- 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 on March 27, 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.

Kyodo has placed the number of unrecovered bodies within the evacuation region as high as 1000 and describes the painful dilemma both the authorities and families face:

> *The authorities are now considering how to collect the bodies, given fears that police officers, doctors and bereaved families may be exposed to radiation in retrieving the radiation-exposed bodies or at morgues, according to the sources. They initially planned to inspect the bodies after transporting them outside the evacuation zone, but the plan is being reconsidered due to the concerns over exposure… Even after the bodies are handed over to the victims' families, cremating them could spread plumes containing radioactive materials, while burying the victims could contaminate the soil around them, according to the sources. The authorities are considering decontaminating and inspecting the bodies where they are found. But the sources said that cleansing decomposing bodies could damage them further. Victims can be identified through DNA analysis of nail samples, but even then considerable time and effort must be taken to decontaminate the samples, according to experts.*

On April 1, Jiji reported continued difficulties in recovering bodies within the evacuation zone. A lack of manpower and the necessity for extra equipment such as devices to measure radiation have made the search difficult. On April 2, it was reported that the Fukushima Prefectural Police have consulted with the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare and the Nuclear Safety Commission of Japan on how to handle bodies that have been heavily contaminated with radiation. They have been instructed to bury or cremate bodies as normal and authorities have suggested that this will cause no further health effects of contamination.

Meanwhile, the Yomiuri reported on the 28th that people are 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 to care 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. With both the threat of radiation and as many as 1000 bodies left exposed for weeks, the government is debating immediate action to force evacuation.