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Japan's government faces looming crisis over 'whack-a-mole' nuclear policies May. 01, 2011

日本政府、「モグラ叩き」的核政策でのしかかる危機に直面する

David McNeill in Fukushima City

Like most Japanese parents, two months ago Sasaki Takayuki barely knew what radiation was. Today, he thinks about little else. "I've sent my kids to my wife's family in Tokyo," says the baker and father of two. "I told her to stay there till it's safe but who knows when that will be? We've all been left in the dark."

Seven weeks since the start of Japan's worst nuclear crisis, political tremors are intensifying in the prefecture that hosts the ruined Fukushima Daiichi power plant. Mr. Sasaki is among thousands of parents in the prefecture, about 250 km northeast of Tokyo, demanding that the government of Prime Minister Kan Naoto reverse a decision to hike radiation limits for schools in the area by 20 times.

The decision has come in for withering criticism by government advisor Kosako Toshiso, who announced his resignation on Friday after denouncing what he called the prime minister's "whack-a-mole" policies on the crisis. "The government has belittled laws and taken decisions only for the present moment," said a tearful Mr. Kosako.

He added that new guidelines upping the acceptable annual radiation exposure in Fukushima Prefecture's elementary schools from one to twenty millisieverts "are inconsistent with internationally commonsensical figures." "They were determined by the administration to serve its interests."

Over 80,000 people have already been evacuated from a 20-km zone around the Fukushima plant, which has been leaking radiation since the March 11 earthquake and tsunami triggered a partial meltdown of its reactors. Thousands more living 20-30 km away will become nuclear refugees this month under government orders. Some residents want operator Tokyo Electric Power Co. (Tepco) to pay for the prefecture's entire population of two million to be shipped out. "Those parents who have the means to move their children are already doing so," says Mr. Sasaki. "I feel like one of the lucky ones because my wife is from Tokyo."

Mr. Kan's government has repeatedly defended the new limits, which are equal to the annual maximum dose permitted for German nuclear workers. Workers at power plants in the United States can be exposed to 50 millisieverts per year. The average annual radiation exposure from natural sources is about 3.1 millisieverts, according to the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission. The impact of cumulative exposure on children, however, is a scientific grey area. Parents in Fukushima say the government's calculations are deceptive because they assume people spend most of their time indoors.

"I keep my children inside now all the time because I'm afraid of what they're breathing," said Soeta Niki, a mother of two from the prefecture. "Can the government imagine what that's like? We want to be reassured that it's safe." She was among hundreds of parents who gathered Sunday in a meeting hall in Fukushima City to plan strategy and protests against the government policy.

"We're all absolutely furious," said Sato Machiko, banging the table for emphasis. "We're angry at the government and at Tepco for doing this to us. We're breathing in this contaminated air as we speak. But we're old and the radiation can't do us much harm. It's the children we have to protect."

Parents and lobbyists are scheduled to meet government bureaucrats Monday May 2, to hand a petition demanding the withdrawal of the new radiation standard. Activists say the country's Nuclear Safety Commission rubber stamped the school radiation limit after just two hours closed-door discussion, without consulting anyone outside of the government. Fukushima Prefecture was informed of the standard on April 19, which bureaucrats said was equivalent to 3.8 microsieverts per hour.

Advisor Kosako also criticised the government for stalling the release of simulations showing the spread of radiation from the Fukushima plant. The head of Japan's Meteorological Society, Niino Hiroshi admitted last week that announcing all the radiation forecasts carried the risk of "creating panic" among the public.

"The system isn't working because it's top down," said Mr. Sasaki. "The officials from the Nuclear Safety Commission tell the government what they've decided. The government tells Fukushima. Fukushima tells the schools and the school principals tell us that it's safe. That's when I knew it was time to get my kids out of school. I just don't believe them."

For more information on the issue of radiation exposure for Fukushima children and Kosako's resignation, please see:

20 Millisieverts for Children and Kosako Toshiso's Resignation

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