



‘We’ve no idea when we’ll be back’

May. 11, 2011

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David McNeill in Iitate, Fukushima Prefecture

Sleepy, idyllic and dangerously irradiated, Iitate is preparing to evacuate. The junior high school is closed, its children bused every day to nearby towns. Tractors sit idle and weeds poke through rice and cabbage in the fields. Half-empty shelves greet customers at the A-Coop supermarket. By the end of this month, this mountainous farming village of 7,000 people, recently voted one of Japan’s most beautiful places, will join the Ukrainian ghost town of Pripyat in the planet’s short list of nuclear casualties.

“We’ve no idea when we can come back,” says Katsuzo Shoji, who farms rice and cabbages and keeps a small herd of cattle about 2 km from Iitate’s village office. Mr. Shoji (75) went from shock to rage, then despair when the government told him he would have to destroy his vegetables, kill his six cows and move with his wife Fumi (73) to an apartment, probably in Koriyama City, about 20 km away. “We’ve heard five, maybe 10 years but some say that’s far too optimistic,” he says, crying. “Maybe I’ll be able to come home to die.”

Iitate has been living on borrowed time since the March 11 earthquake and tsunami knocked out the cooling systems of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, about 40 km away. Though outside the 30km government exclusion zone set up around the plant, the village’s mountainous topography meant radiation spewing from its crippled reactors lingered, poisoning crops and water. The young, the wealthy, mothers and pregnant women began leaving for Tokyo or elsewhere. The rest gathered every day in the village office for information, and prayed against the inevitable.

Last month the central government finally ordered the remaining citizens to leave after the International Atomic Energy Agency and other observers warned that safe radiation limits for cesium and other toxins had been exceeded. “We’ve been told to quit our jobs and move out by the end of the month,” says Miyoko Nakamura (59), who works as a clerk in the village office. She is near retirement and says she’ll manage. “A lot of people have no idea what to do. They’re just hoping everything will be ok somehow.”

Villagers snort at the initial compensation of one million yen (8,670 Euro/7577 pounds) offered by Tokyo Electric Power Co (Tepco), operator of the ruined Fukushima plant. Farmers will be given another 350,000 yen in moving expenses this month. After that, there are no more concrete promises. “Money is the biggest question people have,” explains Takashi Hamasaka, an official from Japan’s Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) seconded to the village to assist evacuation. “They want the government to pay more.”

“If it was just a tsunami or earthquake we would pay, but the nuclear problem was made by Tepco so the situation is so difficult.”

Among his government’s tasks is finding homes for 700 family pets that will be left behind. Thousands of pigs and over 8,000 of the region’s famous, prized “wagyu” beef cattle, worth up to a million yen a head, will be slaughtered if they can’t be relocated. Apartments in towns outside the irradiated zone must be found for locals, who are being kept alive on supplies shipped into the village office; bottled water, masks, and nappies for bedridden elderly lie in boxes around the hall. Locals arrive in light vans to pick up the supplies and glance at the Geiger counter across the road, which hovers at around 3.15 microsieverts per hour.

Tepco officials, led by executive vice president Norio Tsuzumi, came to the village hall over a week ago to apologise. Pictures from the visit show the officials, in identical utility suits, bowing deeply before 1000 mostly stony-faced locals. “Give us back our beautiful village,” one demanded. Some say the disaster is too big for any company to manage, even one as powerful as Japan’s largest utility. “At least they can raise electricity prices, says Mr. Shoji. “What can we do except wait for our homes back.”

Local restaurants have already shut. Many display signs of a smiling cartoon cow, symbol of Iitate beef, now too irradiated to sell. The one supermarket, a crucial lifeline to many elderly customers, still operates -- at least for now. A notice on the window lists the names of NPOs willing to look after abandoned pets. “We’re waiting to see what happens; some older people are not leaving and they need us,” says manager Toshiyuki Matsuda. “They would have to shop 20 km away if we weren’t here.”

A woman in the car park outside bundles her shopping into a small pickup truck. “I’m old, I’ve been here all my life – where would I go,” she asks. “I’m going to stay and if the supermarket closes I’ll go elsewhere.” What will the government do to holdouts? METI official Mr. Hamasaka shrugs his shoulders. “It’s a good question. We don’t have any power to force them to go.” Faced with a similar problem closer to the stricken power plant, the government last month made the 20km zone around it a no-go area. Evacuees who return there now face arrest and fines. Hundreds of thousands of farm animals are being slaughtered.

Farmers here claim their produce is safe to eat but the country has become hysterical about the Fukushima contamination. Many have heard stories of bullying against children evacuated from the village, sometimes hundreds of miles away, a painful echo of the decades-long discrimination that dogged survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, A-bombed by US planes in 1945. "I've heard that other kids shout 'baikin' (vermin) at them," says Mr. Shoji's granddaughter Hiroko (22).

Like many in the area, Mr. Shoji, whose family has been farming this land since the 1880s, is too old to become embroiled in a protracted legal battle with Tepco or the government. "All we can do is bow our heads and heed the order," he says as his wife, granddaughter and eldest son Hidekatsu look sadly on. He has been told that he will be taken care of but fears that compensation offers will dwindle once the media spotlight shines elsewhere.

The bitterest irony of the crisis that has destroyed their lives, he says, is that this rural area, 250km from Tokyo, sees not a single watt of the electricity produced by Tepco's Fukushima plant. "All the power is sent to the city. We had nothing to do with this problem but we will have to somehow bear the burden."

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