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Minamata at 50: The tragedy deepens

By Eric Johnston

"*The most dangerous enemy to truth and freedom amongst us is the compact majority.*" Henrik Ibsen, "An Enemy of the People."

As public spaces in Japan go, Minamata's Eco Park is quite pleasant. Unlike the "Designed by local elders and built by a yakuza-linked construction firm now under indictment" concrete monstrosities that often pass for "parks" in Japan, one can actually relax in Eco Park and enjoy a stroll along the waterfront of Minamata bay and the Shiranui Sea off Kyushu in western Japan.

Although it was not built in order to line the pockets of local politicians and businesses, Eco Park does have a purpose. Two, actually. The first is above ground, and located beside the bay. It's a small stone memorial that reads, "To all life forms of the Shiranui Sea that were victims. This tragedy shall not be repeated. Sleep in peace." Scattered about the memorial are small clay figurines of shellfish. The second purpose is right beneath your feet. For buried underneath the bucolic park is 27 tons of mercury-tainted sludge from Minamata Bay that was dredged and used as landfill.

Minamata Bay

The clay figurines at the memorial serve as a poignant reminder that Minamata Disease, which was first officially reported on May 1st, 1956, has affected all life forms. This year marked the 50th anniversary of that report, and on May 1st, nearly 600 people, including dozens of Minamata victims and their families and friends, gathered to remember the over 900 people who died after ingesting mercury-tainted seafood, and the thousands who continue to suffer from numbness and paralysis. The ceremony was sponsored by Minamata City and the guest of honor was Environment Minister Koike Yuriko, whose agency has consistently fought against further compensation or efforts to certify all those who are suffering from the medically-accepted definition of Minamata Disease but cannot get the government to recognize their plight for political reasons. The city had originally wanted Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro to put in an appearance as well, but he said no.

Environment Minister Koike Yuriko

Even the chairman of Chisso was present. For the past half-century, Japan's, and the world's, environmentalists have cursed the name of Chisso. This is the company that caused Minamata Disease by dumping organic mercury into the bay, and then denying responsibility when the first victims appeared. This is the company that twisted the arms of the first impoverished victims back in 1959, forcing them to sign an agreement saying they would not sue Chisso even if in the future the company was found to be the cause. In return, they got payments of between 30,000 and 300,000 yen, minuscule sums, yet more money than most had ever seen.

The Chisso Minamata plant

As evidence mounted that the company was, indeed, responsible, Chisso organized a massive public disinformation campaign designed to isolate the victims as greedy rabble-rousers ignorant of science and the doctors who supported them as amateurs or anti-capitalist communist dupes. Corrupt scientists at leading universities, often in Chisso's pocket, were enlisted in the attempt. One tenured stooge in Tokyo trumpeted his "scientific research" that showed the waters of Minamata bay did not have particularly high mercury levels and, therefore, Chisso could not be the cause of the disease. In fact, as it was quickly pointed out, the scientist purposely avoided taking samples from the seabed, where mercury concentrations were highest. Nor was the propaganda campaign limited to academia. Corporate titans allied with Chisso spun fantastic lies about why the victims were sick, making up stories about old chemical weapons having been dumped into Minamata bay after World War II and now leaking toxins.

Finally, when all attempts at propaganda failed, and the world woke up to the horrors of Minamata from the photographs of noted LIFE magazine photographer Eugene Smith, it was Chisso-hired yakuza thugs who beat up Smith, giving him injuries that affected his eyesight and forcing an end to a brilliant career.

Chisso would not be found guilty for its years of negligence until 1973, four years after a group of victims in Kumamoto Prefecture took the company to court. In 1979, the Supreme Court would, separately, find top Chisso executives guilty of negligent homicide.

By then, the Environment Ministry was faced with thousands of applications from those seeking certification as Minamata Disease victims. (It was indeed strange, even by the Byzantine standards of the Japanese bureaucracy, that the Environment Ministry, not the Health and Welfare Ministry decided what was unquestionably a health and welfare issue). The ministry, fearing the financial implications of having to approve unknown numbers of victims, decided in 1977 to adopt stricter certification standards, effectively denying tens of thousands of sufferers the right to compensation. The decision was condemned by medical experts in Japan and abroad as completely lacking in scientific or medical reasoning.

It also launched another round of lawsuits throughout the 1980s from those suffering from the disease but not officially recognized as such. Finally, when Socialist Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi came to power in 1994, he declared one of his goals was a final settlement in the Minamata Disease saga. In late December 1995, with the LDP and Environment Ministry no longer opposed to central government compensation if it meant an end to the lawsuits, the Murayama Cabinet awarded 2.6 million each to the uncertified victims on condition that they could show a loss of sensation in all four limbs and would agree to withdraw their lawsuits and not seek further legal action.

Although Murayama apologized to the victims, that did not constitute formal, legal responsibility on the part the government for its complacency in failing to stop the dumping of the mercury. Nevertheless, more than 10,000 victims nationwide, aging and tired of the long court battles, accepted the compensation package. But one small group of victims in the Kansai region refused and fought on to establish the central government's culpability. It would take a nearly a decade, but, in 2004, the Japanese Supreme Court ruled the national government and Kumamoto Prefecture were jointly liable for the cause and spread of Minamata Disease.

"The Supreme Court decision upheld the Osaka High Court ruling of 2001. That ruling said both the national and Kumamoto prefectural governments had responsibility for the cause and spread of Minamata Disease from 1960 onwards, damage that could have been prevented if the government authorities had taken appropriate measures," said Dr. Ekino Shigeo, a professor of medicine at Kumamoto University, whose testimony on behalf of the Kansai plaintiffs played a key role in both the High Court verdict and Supreme Court decision.

What the decision meant was that, because the government was responsible for what happened from 1960 onwards, it was also responsible for those who developed Minamata Disease after 1960 but were not officially certified. Just as important, the Supreme Court decision also laid down new criteria for who was, officially, a Minamata Disease victim. Such requirements were less strict than the 1977 guidelines the Environment Ministry was still using.

Sadly, if those plaintiffs seeking certification thought the Supreme Court decision would end their waiting, they were wrong. Environment Minister Koike did little more than appoint a panel to study the issue. Then, essentially ignoring the Supreme Court, she said, in effect, that her ministry would stick to the 1977 guidelines. Pressure continued, though, and, finally, just before Golden Week this year, media reports indicated the government would address the Supreme Court ruling by providing a medical allowance of around 20,000 yen a month to people who are not certified as disease victims, but show 'mild symptoms'. (1) But anger over the government's refusal to honor the letter of the Supreme Court decision continues to simmer, and many of the victims are wondering what the next step might be. One possibility might be to appeal to the United Nations to investigate whether the Minamata victims

have had their basic human rights, as recognized in U.N. treaties that Japan has signed and ratified, violated by the Japanese government.

At present, nobody knows the true number of Minamata Disease sufferers. Medical experts believe there may be up to 30,000 people who have been affected by the poisoning. So far, though, only about 2,300 people have been certified as having Minamata Disease, while another 10,000 have applied but been rejected. Life for the victims has been a long nightmare of physical suffering and, in the beginning at least, social ostracism. Speaking from his wheelchair at the May 1st ceremony, Hamamoto Tsuginori, head of the Minamata Disease Victims Association, tearfully recalled being bullied and threatened back in the 1950s and 1960s when he attempted to bring Chisso to justice.

Hamamoto Tsuginori.

Like Dr. Thomas Stockmann in Ibsen's "An Enemy of the People", a play which the young doctors who cared for the earliest Minamata patients took to heart, Hamamoto and the victims, as well as all who helped them, were branded traitors and troublemakers by not only Chisso but also angry relatives, friends and neighbors in the small town, all of whom relied on Chisso for their livelihood. People crossed the street if they saw a Minamata victim or the relative of a victim coming their way. Shopkeepers refused them service. Officials, ranging from lowly ward office officials all the way up to the Environment Ministry suggested, sometimes directly, sometimes obliquely, that the victims themselves bore responsibility for their plight.

Today, within Minamata itself, much of the social stigma surrounding Minamata Disease patients has been replaced by understanding and sympathy for their plight, although some locals claim it's not uncommon for those seeking to get married to check up on the prospective bride or groom's background to ensure there are no Minamata Disease patients.

And many of the elderly Minamata Disease patients who fled the town in shame and fear decades ago kept, and continue to keep, a low profile. For years, Sakamoto Miyoko, a Minamata Disease victim who lives in Osaka, did not tell people she was originally from Minamata.
"I would always say I was from Kyushu or Kumamoto, but never Minamata. It was not until the early 1970s, at which point I'd been living in Osaka for some time, that my friends learned I was from Minamata. This was because of my involvement in the court case against Chisso and the fact that my picture appeared in the newspapers. I had to explain to people what the disease was and assure them it was not contagious," she said.

If there has been any good news to the tragedy of Minamata, it is that the struggles of the victims gave rise to an aggressive, nationwide citizens' environmental movement in the 1960s and early 1970s that led to some much needed environmental laws—indeed, to the creation of the Environmental Agency itself. And the momentum from that time continues. Many of today's activists trying to halt the country's nuclear power industry or warning about the dangers of asbestos are veterans of, or have a great interest in, the battles fought by the Minamata victims.

Logo for the commemorative year being used by Minamata Forum, a Tokyo-based NPO. Photograph by Shisei Kuwabara

Even Minamata officials recognize a connection between their tragedy and nuclear power. At the May 1st ceremonies, among those invited to place flowers at the memorial and offer their prayers were local government officials from Tokaimura, where the country's worst nuclear power accident occurred in 1999.

As ceremonies of this type go, the May 1st event for the Minamata victims had a quiet dignity that was noticeably absent from the tacky, theatrical, forced atmosphere and contrived, maudlin emotions and platitudes one too often sees and hears at the official Hiroshima ceremony each August 6th, or the annual memorial service Hyogo Prefecture holds on January 17th to remember victims

of the Great Hanshin Earthquake. This is, perhaps, due to the fact that the Minamata tragedy is very much ongoing and very much the story of citizens fighting the powers-that-be. The victims, even a half century later, remain visible, and very vocal, deterrents to ever more extravagant productions and, more importantly, historical revisionists in the government and industry who would use such productions in order to rewrite the Minamata story to suit their own ends and silence the truth about what really happened and why.

But for how much longer? Each year, the Minamata victims get older and a few more pass away. In the past, attempts like the one the Ministry of Education made back in 1981 to expunge the name "Chisso" from a high school textbook chapter on Minamata Disease could be easily blocked. Back then, there were enough people who understood the horrors, and the truth, of Minamata to defeat what Ibsen called the "compact majority" of dishonest public officials and business leaders, and the apathetic, or indifferent members of the media and the public who follow them blindly.

But this year, with virtually no opposition or media discussion, both Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro and Environment Minister Koike Yuriko, dismissed by political pundits as "Koizumi's geisha", relied on the pro forma government explanation for Minamata, the one used in official Japan when all other lies and excuses have failed: shikata ga nai (it couldn't be helped). Minamata Disease, both Koizumi and Koike said, occurred at a time when Japan was rapidly recovering from the war and national policy emphasized industrial output above all else. Therefore, they would have us conclude, all subsequent problems were because the government was "unable" to respond as effectively as it should have. Shikata ga nai, and now we know better. Let's forget the past and move forward, because arguing over the reasons why Minamata Disease occurred (as if there were some "argument" over the causes of Minamata to begin with) isn't going to bring back the dead.

Such rhetoric forms the basis of a strategy that has often served Japan's historical revisionists in government, industry, the media, and the public at large quite well, whether the history they are rewriting is that of a small town that was once poisoned by mercury, or of an entire nation that was once poisoned by military propaganda.

(1) "New Allowance Planned for Minamata Victims," The Daily Yomiuri, April 9th, 2006.

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