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Legacy of Japanese island's World War II poison-gas plant lives on

By Kato Takeo and Yamane Yusaku

TAKEHARA, Hiroshima Prefecture- Yamauchi Masayuki guides a group of junior high school students through the hills and forests on the tiny island of Okunoshima in Hiroshima Prefecture.

When a curious rabbit approaches, Yamauchi pauses.

"Here, rabbits were used in experiments to test the effects of poison gas produced at the plant," Yamauchi tells the children from Niiyoshi Junior High School in Kasaoka city in neighboring Okayama Prefecture.

The site is where the Imperial Japanese Army in 1929 built a secret poison-gas plant for the war effort.

The army ordered residents near the plant site to relocate. Plant workers were forbidden to tell anyone, even their parents, about their jobs.

The secrecy reached new heights in 1938, when the army erased Okunoshima island from maps of Japan compiled by the army's land-surveying section.

Today, the 0.7-square-kilometer island, located 3 km off the coast of Takehara city, draws as many as 10,000 students on school trips annually.

The island has developed into a resort area with beach activities, pools and hotels.

Yamauchi, 60, serves as a guide to pass down the island's hidden history to younger generations.

For years, he wanted to uncover the island's past.

Twenty years ago, when he was a senior high school teacher, Yamauchi started interviewing former workers at the poison-gas production plant.

Many had developed illnesses related to their wartime work.

Yamauchi retired last spring but has maintained his interest in Okunoshima island. He is now secretary-general of an institute set up in 1996 to research the history of the island.

Yamauchi and his colleagues have kept records of the testimonies of the plant's former workers.

One of them told Yamauchi that he asked a nurse at the plant's medical office about a rabbit with blisters all over its body.

The nurse replied that the rabbit would not recover because it was being used in experiments, according to Yamauchi.

Nobody knows what happened to the animals at the plant after the end of World War II, according to the former workers. But some said most of the rabbits on the island today are descendants of rabbits that were later kept as pets and abandoned.

According to Yoshimi Yoshiaki, a professor of Japanese history at Chuo University, the plant produced about 6,616 tons of poison gas.

Some of it went to China, where the unused portions were buried and abandoned by imperial troops.

After the war ended, the poison-gas production facilities were burned and disposed of by occupation forces.

But it took the Environment Ministry until 1998 to start cleaning up the contaminated soil at the site.

Many researchers now come to the island, including Rong Weimu from the Institute of Modern History of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing.

"I wanted to see the source of the abandoned chemical weapons that are now harming people in many places in China," Rong said, after visiting Okunoshima in early July.

Rong, 53, one of the co-authors from Japan, China and South Korea who prepared a joint textbook, was on a trip to Japan at the invitation of the Japan-China friendship association in Hiroshima Prefecture.

"I saw that efforts for cleaning up the contaminated soil are still ongoing here, even after 60 years have passed," Rong said. "And I have become anxious about whether we can protect the environment in the same way in China, where chemical weapons were abandoned.

"I would like people who see the beautiful island to remember that there was once an unimaginable time, and to think about the importance of peace."

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