



Back from the Brink: A city in ruins looks to the future

David McNeill

As Japan's government gets set to expand a nuclear evacuation area, the mayor of a city inside the radioactive zone speaks about his fears.

David McNeill in Minami-Soma City

Like most Japanese men, Sakurai Katsunobu read apocalyptic comic book stories about the future when he was a boy. He never expected to live through one of those stories himself.

A common plot sees a modern city reduced overnight to a ghostly husk as fears of nuclear contamination empties it of people. Businesses shut and food, water and petrol run out. Old people left behind begin dying. The city mayor makes a desperate televised appeal for help. Such is real life in Sakurai's city of Minami-Soma.

Over 71,000 people lived here before March 11. Today there are fewer than 10,000. About 1,470 are dead or missing, the remainder are scattered throughout Japan in over 300 different locations, "as far as we can tell," adds Sakurai, who took over as mayor in January. Dangling from his neck are two radiation counters, a reminder that the nightmare that descended on his city last month has yet to end.



Mayor Sakurai (center)

Mayor Sakurai briefly became one of the most famous faces of Japan's disaster when he posted an 11-minute video on YouTube pleading for help. The March 11 quake and tsunami had pulverised the city's coast, but it was its proximity to the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Plant 25 km away that transformed the city's predicament into an existential crisis.

As a series of explosions ripped through the plant, the government told its citizens to stay indoors to avoid radiation. Journalists fled, deliveries stopped coming and the locals were left to fend for themselves. "Everyone who could leave left. We were not getting food or fuel. Life was unbearable," recalls Sakurai.

Exhausted, he sat in front of a digital camcorder in his office and recorded one of the most haunting dispatches from the disaster zone, reaching outside Japan's borders and rounding on Tokyo and the plant operator Tokyo Electric Power Co (Tepco) for abandoning Minami-Soma. "With the scarce information we can gather from the government or Tepco, we are left isolated. I beg you to help us," he said.

The video scored over 200,000 hits and sparked a worldwide relief effort that continues to send aid and help flooding into Sakurai's office. But he remains angry at how his citizens were treated. "The video put pressure on the government. But there was not a single phone call from Tepco for 22 days," he says, still wearing the same grey boiler suit he wore in the YouTube video. "They gave us no information at all."

Today, Tepco official Takakissei permanently seconded to the Minami-Soma city office. His job is to report on the frantic daily fight inside the Fukushima plant to stop radiation leaking from its damaged reactors. "We have a seven-AM meeting with the mayor every day where I report the reactor temperatures, pressure, contamination levels and anything else he wants to know," explains Takaki.

One of the hundreds of workers at the nuclear facility when the March 11 quake/tsunami struck, he spent 10 days locked down inside during the worst of the crisis, when he often thought he was going to die. But the last few days in this town have been almost as difficult. "People are angry" he accepts. "They stop me to say they want the plant fixed so they can return to their old lives."

In the last week, some of Minami-Soma's citizens have begun drifting back, while warily watching the wounded plant up the coast. Supermarkets, restaurants and most of the bigger companies remain shut, but some of the smaller shops in the city are reopening. "I left my daughter in Tokyo to come back to work," explains Mayumi Hayashi, who serves customers in a half-empty Seven-Eleven convenience store about a kilometer from the city office. "I told her to stay there until the end of the month, at least until we see if the plant is safe."

Few profess much faith in Tepco, which has dumped almost 8,000 tons of toxic water into the local seas since Monday. Another 60,000 tons is on site. Tepco admitted yesterday that the level of highly radioactive water inside concrete tunnels in the No. 2 reactor is rising. Engineers are trying to prevent a buildup of hydrogen inside reactor 1, the prelude to another possible explosion. Nobody believes the crisis is over.

"The radiation doesn't seem so dangerous now but who knows what will happen?" frets Watanabe Rikio, a truck driver who returned from an evacuation center this week to his home on the city outskirts. The plant is never far from their minds, he says, recalling how they felt the ground tremble when the explosions began there three weeks ago. His wife Miyoko can no longer work at a local food cooperative since sales of mildly radioactive potatoes, cabbages and other vegetables have been banned. "Life is difficult but it's better to be at home," she says.

Mayor Sakurai frets that the plant will hobble, perhaps destroy the town's return from the brink. The government has just announced it may expand the evacuation zone around the plant, emptying Minami-Soma of its last 10,000 citizens.

As he speaks, the tap-tap of a house being repaired drifts in from outside. Life is returning to the city center. But many people are keeping their children far away. He has heard reports that some are being bullied because of fears about contamination. His parents are among the evacuees.

"The radiation here is low," he insists, showing one of his counters, which reads 0.9 microsieverts. The second shows he has accumulated 16 microsieverts in four days. At its worst, he says, it was about 10 microsieverts an hour. "It's worse outside the 30km zone. "Radiation doesn't travel in neat circles."

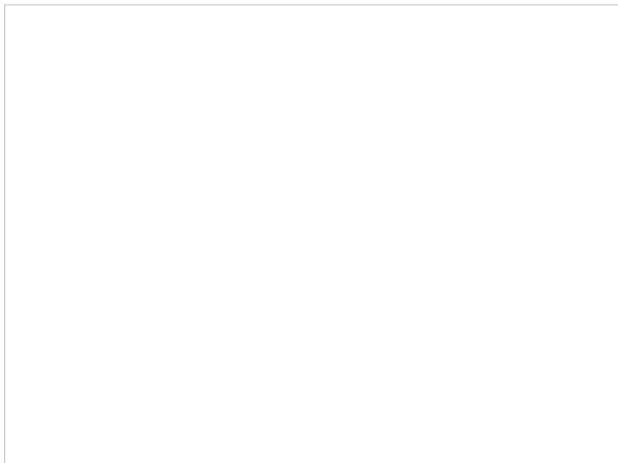
He says he has never despaired. "On the surface, we're starting to move forward and radiation is falling slowly but by far the biggest problem is the Fukushima reactors. I think the accident shows we have to stop building nuclear plants. The radiation doesn't stop in Japan, it goes all around the world."

One Month after the Quake

David McNeill in Tokyo

Hanami season in Japan is usually a time for the nation to let its collective hair down, celebrating the arrival of spring cherry blossoms by drinking beer and sake and partying in parks and city streets. This year the mood has been dampened by the national mantra of "jishuku", or self-restraint.

Lights in Tokyo are dimmed, restaurants are half-empty and most cherry blossom parties are a muted affair, overshadowed by the tragedy that befell the northeast on March 11 and the nuclear crisis that it sparked in Fukushima, 250 km up the coast from the capital.



Tokyo demonstration against nuclear power

Nearly 28,000 people are dead or missing after the earthquake and tsunami, many unlikely to be found after being washed out to sea. Police in radiation suits only began last week searching for about 2,400 bodies inside the toxic 20km exclusion zone around the crippled Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant.

The tsunami, over 32 meters tall in some places, ravaged over 500 square kilometers of the northeast coastline in Aomori, Iwate, Miyagi and Fukushima prefectures. The disaster produced 25 million tons of debris, which will take years and as much as 10 trillion yen to clean up, according to a government estimate last week.

Engineers inside the Fukushima plant continue battling to restore cooling systems to at least 4 of the plant's six reactors, and slow contamination. The crisis will likely drag on for months, hindered by a major conundrum: How to keep reactors cool while also disposing of highly radioactive water pooling in and under the plant.

The engineers pull back every day to J-Village, a temporary base about 20 km away run by plant operator Tokyo Electric Power (Tepco). Workers in radiation suits and masks arrive and leave all day at the facility, which is off limits to reporters. Inside the main building, Tepco officials hand out protective clothing, dosimeters, iodine pills and water.

Radiation around the nuclear facility has dropped from a high of 3,000 microsieverts per hour. Over 20 workers have been exposed to over 100 millisieverts and at least two have died. The crisis, which could have been averted had Tepco simply housed its backup diesel generators in tsunami-proof shelters, will force power cuts throughout the sweltering summer months and deliver a potentially crippling blow to some of the world's biggest car and electronics makers.

Wolfgang Weiss, chairman of the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation, this week said Fukushima is second only to the 1986 Chernobyl meltdown in the league table of nuclear disasters. "It is not as dramatic as Chernobyl, but it is certainly much, much more serious than Three Mile Island," he said.

People in towns and cities outlying the exclusion zone are slowly drifting back to their homes but thousands are still taking refuge throughout the country. Over 153,000 are still homeless, waiting for insurance, money for relatives or temporary housing. For some, the psychological impact is only beginning to sink in now. "There have already been suicides," says Saeki Yuji, a clinical psychologist who has been voluntarily working in the coastal city of Ishinomaki, which lost 5,200 citizens in the disaster. "When you ask people in the northeast, 'Are you OK,' they always say 'yes.' But they're not OK. They're grieving."

David McNeill writes for The Independent, The Irish Times and The Chronicle of Higher Education. He is an Asia-Pacific Journal coordinator. This is a revised and updated version of an earlier article published at The Asia-Pacific Journal.

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