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Fukushima Residents Seek Answers Amid Mixed Signals From Media, TEPCO and Government. Report from the Radiation Exclusion Zone (Updated May 16)

Makiko SEGAWA in Fukushima

Mistrust of the media has surged among the people of Fukushima Prefecture. In part this is due to reports filed by mainstream journalists who are unwilling to visit the area near the crippled Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant. But above all it is the result of contradictory reportsreleased by the media, TEPCO and the government.

On the one hand, many local officials and residents in Fukushima insist that the situation is safe and that the media, in fanning unwarranted fears, are damaging the economy of the region.By contrast, many freelance journalists in Tokyo report that the central government is downplaying the fact that radiation leakage has been massive and that the threat to public health has been woefully underestimated. While the government long hewed to its original definition of a 20 kilometer exclusion zone, following the April 12 announcement that the Fukushima radiation severity level has been raised from a level 5 event (as with Three Mile Island) to a level 7 event (as with Chernobyl), the government also extended the radiation exclusion zone from 20 kilometers to at least five communities in the 30-50 kilometer range.

In recent weeks, many Fukushima residents who fled in the first week of the nuclear crisis have begun returning home and attempting to resume normal activities. For example, some local people in Iwaki city, 40-50 km from the Fukushima Daiichi reactor, are convinced that it is now safe to return despite the high radiation levels recorded. Here is one example.

School Entrance Ceremony Amid Radiation Fear in an Exclusion Zone Near the Fukushima Daiichi Reactor

In Japan, April's cherry blossoms signal a symbolic beginning, a new stage in life. On April 6th, along with school children across the nation, Iwaki City, within the 40 km radiation exclusion zone, held many school entrance ceremonies for elementary, middle and high schools.

Iwaki's Yumoto Daini Middle School's ceremony was a bit different: not only were there 33 new students, but refugees living on the school grounds and some members of the Self Defense Force also attended. Overall 107 people participated in the ceremony. Headmaster Sawai Shiro may have exceeded his authority in taking the humanitarian step of granting permission for the refugees to remain on campus as the school year begins, at the risk of being punished later for breaking rules.

School Entrance Ceremony at Yumoto Daini Middle School, Iwaki City, Fukushima

Local sources report that in the first week or so after the nuclear crisis began, Iwaki City experienced difficulties in receiving supplies like food and fuel because many agents refused to deliver.Since early April, refugees who had evacuated outside the prefecture started returning. Restaurants in downtown Iwaki are reopening and many convenience stores boast reasonably well-stocked shelves, while gas, water and electricity have been restored. Iwaki City has repeatedly confirmed that "radiation is at a stable level which is not harmful to human health." Iwaki officials explain that this judgment is based on figures provided by the Fukushima prefectural government regularly updated since March 11.

Principal Sawai began his welcome speech by saying, "I am glad to be able to confirm that all 33 new students are participating in this ceremony amidst a disaster that had forced many people to leave Yumoto.""In our district," he continued,"some people survived by drinking water from their bath for weeks as there was no running water. I want you to care for each other especially for anyone who is in trouble." He concluded, "You young students, are the future of Japan. Now, we should be bound as one beyond differences in ideas, position or self interest."

Though all the new students attended, not all teachers were there. As a result of the catastrophe, personnel for the school was frozen and new teachers were not dispatched to the school, Sawai explained. As a result of the lack of teachers, there will be only one class run by a teacher for each grade.

School Doctor Informs Children "The radiation problem is already finished."

Following the principal's speech, the school's doctor in his white coat stated matter-of-factly that, based on science, people should know that the worst of the earthquake damage had passed and that radiation leakages from the Fukushima Daiichi plant were decreasing and would soon fade away.

"The radiation problem is already finished," he told the children and their parents. "You can go to school and go outside without any problem. You should not fear malicious gossip."

While the doctor's assurance that all major risks have ended would certainly raise eyebrows among most people outside the prefecture, many locals share this belief. We note the difference in perspective between radiation experts and people assessing the issues at a distance and those on the ground facing the destruction of their livelihood. While rumors of the dangers of radiation continue to swirl, many locals are even more afraid that rumors will destroy their businesses and any hope of securing their livelihood and rebuilding their communities.

Ikarashi Yoshitaka, 33, is one who is particularly keen on restoring his business and the local economy, a goal that leads him to downplay warnings of radiation risk."It is just an emotional thesis that ours is 'a city in danger!'" he insisted. Together with dozens of volunteers from across Japan, Ikarashi has visited many areas throughout the radiation exclusion zone. He confidently asserts that his $600 made in U.S "Geiger counter" has detected no abnormal amount of radiation.

Ikarashi is troubled by the fact that the milk business he manages suffered a 90% drop in sales as a result of radiation fears. Some farmers have been forced to throw away their milk, and at least one local farmer is rumored to have committed suicide over the ruin of his business.

Following the government announcement of level 7, Ikarashi observed that “residents will not listen; they don’t trust the government. The greatest concern for locals is to restore their towns and I’m doing my best to restore Iwaki City.”

Honma Hiroshi, 56, on patrol with the SDF in Iwaki comments: “I’m surprised that local people are so calm. Even within the 30 km radiation exclusion zone, they don’t even wear special anti-radiation clothes (Taibex). Even after the level 7 announcement, there has been no panic in the city."

Desperation over the destruction of the local economy appears to have provoked an unscientific optimism concerning radiation in some local communities struggling to get back on their feet.

Shortage of Information and Aid for Fukushima Citizens in the Radiation Exclusion Zone

Ikarashi points out that the reason for the absence of trustworthy information and the presence of baseless gossip is “lack of information”; the national media tend to avoid entering the radiation exclusion zone, fearing contamination and merely regurgitate the claims of the local government and officials obtained by telephone.

A more intense form of the same crisis struck Minami-Soma City, closer to the nuclear plant within the 20 km zone but on its northern side. For more than a week, the city was like an island bereft of food, water, and gasoline. Finally, in desperation, on March 24, Mayor Sakurai Katsunobu sent an SOS to the world through YouTube begging for support to his dying community.

Mayor Sakurai Katsunobu

Mayor Sakurai explained that his gambit of airing a Youtube call for help succeeded in drawing the attention of the central government, and Tokyo has taken seriously subsequent requests. However, Sakurai, said that as of April 6, only 20,000 residents remained of a population of 70,000. “We have to think of the means to save the remaining weak people (aged people and someone who do not have money to evacuate)", Sakurai said sadly.

Minami Soma City

On April 7, the mayor made a second Youtube, observing that "Many businesses had started operating. But, there is no reliable information on the nuclear reactor!"

In the nuclear radiation exclusion zone close to the plant, large numbers of people are out of work. The Fukushima Labor Bureau, on March 29, said that as a result of the East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami disaster, about 58,000 people in approximately 4,800 work places within the 30 km exclusion zone around the Fukushima Nuclear Reactor have lost jobs.

Local people voice concern that the jobless rate is being inflated as a result of pernicious rumors. At the same time that the school ceremony was being held, a long queue of people was lined up in front of the Public Employment Agency in Taira, Iwaki from 8 a.m. in hope of finding work.

Public Employment Agency, Taira

"Before, people formed queues several kilometers long at gas stations; now people stand in a long line at the employment agency," Mori Akira, 63, pastor of the Global Mission Chapel, sighed.

Shimoyamada Matsuto, 50, director of public relations for Iwaki city Disaster Management Headquarters, explained, "Since harmful rumors are so powerful, not only are farming and fishing industries affected, even some industries have been damaged as a result of claims that even machines are contaminated!"

Fukushima provides one third of the electric power for the Tokyo Metropolitan Area, including both nuclear and thermal power plants. “If Fukushima goes down, the entire capital region will panic!" Shimoyamada warned.

Study Session with Hatoyama Yukio and Freelance Journalists: Questioning the Media, the Government and TEPCO

In Tokyo, on April 6, a group of freelance journalists centered on Uesugi Takashi, 43, held a media session with dozens of DPJ lawmakers, including former Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio, to question the performance of the media in the wake of the Fukushima disaster.

Kawauchi Hiroshi, a DPJ member of the House of Representative, stated that “Information about radiation diffusion should be correctly revealed to the nation.

Hatoyama Yukio (right) Uesugi Takashi (left) at media conference

However, so far only once was this done."He explained the frustration of local officials. "The information from TEPCO (Tokyo Electronic Power Company) should be precisely conveyed. I talked to the mayor of Iidate village (in the 30km zone), whotold me, 'There is no information and I do not know what to do.'"

The Media Corruption that Protects TEPCO

Uesugi Takashi explained the core of the problem behind misinformation and rumors.

"Freelance journalists and foreign media are pursuing the facts, even going into the radiation exclusion zone. However, surprisingly, the Japan government continues to prevent freelance journalists and overseas media from gaining access to official press conferences at the prime minister's house and government."

Uesugi stated that since March 11th, the government has excluded all internet media and all foreign media from official press conferences on the "Emergency Situation". While foreign media have scrambled to gather informationabout the Fukushima Reactor, they have been denied access to the direct information provided by the government and one consequence of this is that "rumor-rife news has been broadcast overseas."

In fact, access has been limited in two ways. First, while Chief Cabinet Secretary Edano Yukio holds twice daily press conferences for representatives of the big Japanese media, registered representatives of freelance and internet media are limited to a single press conference per week. Second, in contrast to Japanese media who are briefed regularly by Edano and periodically by Prime Miniser Kan, foreign media are briefed exclusively by administrative staff.

Uesugi also notes that at TEPCO press conferences, which are now being held at company headquarters, foreign correspondents and Japanese freelancers regularly ask probing questions while mainstream journalists simply record and report company statements reiterating that the situation is basically under control and there is nothing to worry about. One reason for this, Uesugi suggests, is that TEPCO, a giant media sponsor, has an annual 20 billion yen advertising budget. "The media keeps defending the information from TEPCO!" "The Japanese media today is no different from the wartime propaganda media that kept repeating to the very end that 'Japan is winning the war against America,'" Uesugi exclaimed.

There is one particularly telling example of the media shielding TEPCO by suppressing information. This concerns "plutonium". According to Uesugi, after the reactor blew up on March 14, there was concern about the leakage of plutonium. However, astonishingly, until two weeks later when Uesugi asked, not a single media representative had raised the question of plutonium at TEPCO's press conferences.

On March 26, in response to Uesugi's query, TEPCO stated, "We do not measure the level of plutonium and do not even have a detector to scale it." Ironically, the next day, Chief Cabinet Secretary Edano announced that "plutonium was detected".

When TEPCO finally released data on radioactive plutonium on March 28, it stated that plutonium -238, -239, and -240 were found in the ground, but insisted that it posed no human risk. Since TEPCO provided no clarification of the meaning of the plutonium radiation findings, the mainstream press merely reported the presence of the radiation without assessment (link). Nippon Television on March 29 headlined its interview with Tokyo University Prof. Nakagawa Keiichi, a radiation specialist, "Plutonium from the power plant—No effect on neighbors."

On March 15, Uesugi criticized TEPCO for its closed attitude toward information on a TBS radio program. For this, he was immediately dismissed from his regular program. The scandal involving TEPCO's silencing of the media took an interesting turn two weeks later. At the time of the disaster on March 11, TEPCO Chairman Katsumata Tsunehisa was hosting dozens of mainstream media executives on a "study session" in China.When asked about this fact by freelance journalist Tanaka Ryusaku at a TEPCO press conference on March 30, Katsumata defended the practice.

"It is a fact that we traveled together to China," he said, "[TEPCO] did not pay all the expenses of the trip, but we paid more than they did. Certainly they are executives of the mass media, but they are all members of the study session."

When Tanaka requested the names of the media executives hosted by TEPCO in China, Katsumata retorted, "I cannot reveal their names since this is private information." But it is precisely such collusive relations between mainstream media, the government and TEPCO, that results in the censorship of information concerning nuclear problems.

Now the Japanese government has moved to crack down on independent reportage and criticism of the government's policies in the wake of the disaster by deciding what citizens may or may not talk about in public. A new project team has been created by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication, the National Police Agency, and METI to combat "rumors" deemed harmful to Japanese security in the wake of the Fukushima disaster.

The government charges that the damage caused by earthquakes and by the nuclear accident are being magnified by irresponsible rumors, and the government must take action for the sake of the public good. The project team has begun to send "letters of request" to such organizations as telephone companies, internet providers, cable television stations, and others, demanding that they "take adequate measures based on the guidelines in response to illegal information. "The measures include erasing any information from internet sites that the authorities deem harmful to public order and morality.

Children of Minami-Soma: An Interview with Mayor Sakurai Katsunobu

Makiko Segawa

In an exclusive interview with the writer in the first week of May, Minami-Soma Mayor Sakurai Katsunobu discussed the potential health risks, especially for children.

Mayor Sakurai—recently named by Time magazine as one of the top 100 influential people of 2011—tends to downplay health concerns, saying that the

current level of radiation in the city is "not that dangerous."

"Certainly, the figure in our city is a bit higher than in Tokyo, but monitoring tests tell us that it is lower than in Fukushima City or Koriyama City, for example."

Both of the cities he named are much further from the troubled Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant than his own community. The

mayor points out that radiation contamination does not correspond neatly with how distance from the plant, but varies widely based on wind direction and the nature of the terrain.

But are the children of Minami-Soma out of danger?

"Of course it is important to move the kids to a safe place," he responds, "but if the current radiation readings continue as they are now, it is not really dangerous."

"If the measurements stabilize," the Mayor continued, "we can think about reopening schools even in the 20-30 km exclusion zone."

Some local schools in the more distant parts of the city have already reopened—since April 22, seven public elementary and middle schools have resumed their functions.

Indeed, on April 27 the city-run Kashima Elementary School held an outdoor emergency exercise for about 700 children involving the scenario of an incoming tsunami.

When pressed about whether or not he was concerned about the future cancer rate among today's local children, Mayor Sakurai offered the following comment: "Regardless of the radiation problem, cancer rates are already surging in society and we need to address this issue realistically."

He insisted that people shouldn't compare the problems in his city with what occurred in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, where many people died in a short period after receiving a blast of concentrated radiation.

"No one even knows for sure how many people died as a result of the Chernobyl disaster—it's as if people are afraid of a ghost that never appears."

Under close questioning, Mayor Sakurai acknowledged that the city has planned for further evacuations should a fresh central government order come down, but quickly added, "I don't want to incite fear among the people."

Sakurai estimated that about 40,000 of the city's normal 70,000 population are currently residing in the city, but about 2/3 of the children have been evacuated.

Outside the city office among the people at large, the same sort of optimism seems to be prevalent.

Yoshihisa Tahara of the Haramachi district of Minami Soma, seemed almost offended to be asked about radiation. This president of a sewage company remarked, "There is no worry about radiation here; it's just an exaggeration."

Near the roadblocks at the 20 kilometer exclusion zone, children were playing outdoors without any hint of concern. When asked what they were doing there, they smiled and jumped around before saying, "We came to meet the soldiers of the Self-Defense Forces!"

Their 30-year-old mother explained that she wasn't worried: "Look at those police over there in light clothing—I don't think there is any cause to be scared."

She did complain, however, that an SDF officer refused to answer her question when she asked how much radiation they were detecting in the area. The officer said that he was under orders not to give out such information to the local residents.

"I cannot trust the government," she remarked, "but no matter how high the radiation may be and whatever compensation I might receive, I don't want to leave here as this is my family's land."

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