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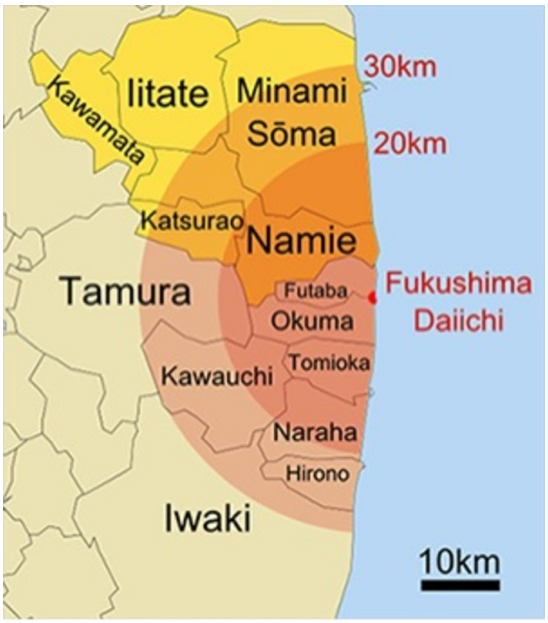
After The Media Has Gone: Fukushima, Suicide and the Legacy of 3.11

Makiko SEGAWA

For the media, time is of the essence in a news story. The March 11, 2011 disaster attracted thousands of reporters and photographers from around the world. There was a brief deluge of Japanese and international media coverage on the first anniversary, this spring. Now the journalists have packed up and gone and by accident or design Japan's government seems to be mobilizing its agenda, aware that it is under less scrutiny.

The press pack has disappeared like a ghost since this April. The influx of foreign media has suddenly stopped, as I can attest since I worked as a translator and aid to many foreign journalists in the year up to the 3.11 anniversary in 2012. Using the keywords 'Fukushima' and 'nuclear plant' in Japanese to scour the Nikkei TELECOM 21 search engine shows 9,981 domestic news items in April 2012, just over half the 17,272 stories the previous month.

As if to take advantage of the precise timing of the media evacuation, the municipal government of Minami-soma city, Fukushima Prefecture began implementing a blueprint planned some time earlier. In the dead of night on Monday April 16th, the city lifted the no-entry regulations and changed evacuation zone designations that had stood since March 12, 2011. The decision allowed people to return to the district of Odaka and some parts of the Haramachi district.



Map showing 20 kilometer evacuation zone and neighboring towns

Watanabe Ichie, a volunteer from Tokyo who witnessed the scene near the roadblock into the zone observed that: "several police vehicles with flashing red lights arrived after 23:00 on April 15th. By 0:15, all the vehicles had gone". "After that, all that remained was the light from the traffic signals." The following morning, cars moved freely inside the once-prohibited area.

Mayor Sakurai's Drive to Reopen Minami-Soma

The home of Minami-soma's mayor, Sakurai Katsunobu, is located in the newly reopened part of Haramachi. He has often complained about what he calls the irrational policy of the government, calculating the exclusion zone by distance rather than the spread of radiation. A former dairy farmer and a passionate booster of the region, he is attached to his land and desperate to quicken the reconstruction of his devastated city, despite the risks.

The 56-year-old mayor has been single all his life and has no children. In interviews, he tends to downplay the risk of radiation. In the first week of May 2011, he even joked: "Fukushima is not the same as Hiroshima or Nagasaki. No one even knows for sure how many people died as a result of the Chernobyl disaster. Regardless of radiation, the cancer rate in our world is quite high. Yet people appear to be afraid of radiation, which is like a ghost that never appears."

The city reopened the no-entry zone in May, insisting that radiation levels in Odaka and some parts of Haramachi had fallen enough to be safe. However, some residents are unhappy with this decision. Shibaguchi Takashi (42), a former acupuncturist and the father of a 6-year-old daughter Nana, refuses to return to his home inside the former exclusion zone, preferring his temporary accommodation. "The city says that the radiation level is completely safe, but when my neighbors checked the radiation level under the eaves of my house, it was over two microsieverts." (henceforth, μSv) He added: "I am sure that radioactive materials released immediately after the explosion are unchanged on the leaking roof. I believe it is too dangerous to go back there."

Even if it were safe, Odaka has other problems: "There is no reconstruction of public facilities and infrastructure, and I wonder how we can make a living there." There is also growing anxiety over the compensation process among evacuees inside the newly liberated zone. Does this mean that compensation is going to be halted, as many fear?

On April 21st, with cherry blossoms in full bloom in Minami-soma, I was shown around Odaka and parts of Haramachi by 73-year-old Otome Takao, the head of a group of local volunteers and owner of a business hotel called "Rokkaku" near a former security check point. The roadblocks were gone and I saw many cars going back and forth inside the area. Lots of police cars were patrolling – neighbors said that as soon as the security check points were lifted, thieves began sneaking into houses.

The area is like a wasteland. There is almost no life, most facilities are closed, the shopping street is dead and everything has basically frozen in time since March 11, 2011.

In many places, water is leaking as the tsunami and earthquake shifted the ground. Debris from the disaster is scattered everywhere, and houses, shrines and infrastructure are badly damaged. By contrast, the cherry trees were in full bloom as if nothing was wrong, regardless of the chaos caused by contamination and radiation.

Some residents, including small children who looked to be under 10 years old were cleaning up the streets in front of their houses from the mud and vegetation washed up by the Tsunami. Near the coastline, others were clearing out the mud from houses that had been partially swallowed up by the water.

Cherry blossoms in Minami-soma

Odaka under mountains of debris one year after the earthquake

April is a symbolic month in Japan because thousands of students enter new schools. Some public schools in the city that were closed amidst fears of high radiation are now able to reopen, based on the results of the local governmental reports on decontamination.

But

Odaka-Shrine--deformed by the earthquake

Miura Bansyo, a Buddhist priest and anti-nuclear activist, has disputed government claims that schools are safe. He and other members of his NGO confirmed radiation of 2 – 9 uSv per hour at a number of spots on the school route around the Ishigami Daiichi Elementary School in February 2012. Disregarding his warnings, the elementary school was reopened on February 27th, accommodating hundreds of pupils.

Growing concern about the health risks for children aside, residents of the city appear to be leading ordinary lives. At Yonomori Park, the most popular site for "Hanami" viewing in the city, about a dozen children played in the sand under the beautiful cherry blossom on April 21th – admittedly a much smaller number than usual.

Children at play at Yonomori Park, April 21, 2012 at the peak of cherry blossom viewing

Suzuki Tokiko (64), who lives near the park, detected 0.97 uSv per hour there with her own dosimeter on April 20th. When she informed the city, she says they responded that "The radiation level is low and you can enjoy cherry blossom viewing without problems."

After the crisis began on April 19th, 2011, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology announced that the amount of radiation a child can be exposed to in one year is 20 millisieverts. This figure is 20 times higher than the former exposure ceiling of 1 millisievert per year.

Despite growing concern about the health of children, an experts-panel commissioned by the Cabinet last December 15th rubber-stamped the 20-millisievert cap for exposure per year. The report said, "the risk to health, compared to other cancer-promoting factors, is low. Smoking contains a risk equivalent to 1000-2000 millisieverts, obesity 200-500 millisieverts, and lack of vegetables and passive smoking is equal to 100-200 millisieverts."[1]

Dr. Koide Hiroaki, assistant professor at Kyoto University's Nuclear Reactor Experiment Research Center, criticized those standards in a discussion with the author in January: "Japan is supposed to be a law-abiding country. So, legally, we should not expose ordinary people to more than 1 millisievert a year", he said. He explained, "I am considered 'a radiation worker' since I work at a radiation research laboratory at Kyoto University. The upper limit of radiation exposure per year for me is 20 millisieverts as I am paid in accordance to my exposure to radiation. Only those with such specialized jobs are allowed exposure to that level of radiation and if they exceed the cap, they have to leave their jobs."

"The government is pushing this standard on ordinary people, including children. That is a very high exposure level that goes beyond the imagination," he said angrily.

A fifth grader (age 11) at Haramachi Daisan Elementary School, alluded to the fact that, among those who remained in the city, radiation has become the elephant in the room. "Now, no one talks about radiation. Teachers used to talk about it but it has stopped since 3 months ago. I no longer hear anything about it."

He reported that 21 students have returned to his class, down from 30 before March 11. He lives in the city with his father, his mother having fled to Hiroshima with his 1-year-old sister. The boy innocently disclosed that his parents' marriage is probably on the rocks because his mum has found a new boyfriend in Hiroshima. Indeed, marriages have been strained by the divisions since 3.11.

Apart from lifting the no-go zone in Odaka and parts of Haramachi, the city government plans to start "disaster area reconstruction support tours", as early as June. The city wants to bring back tourists and is even planning to allow people to experience nuclear hazards by providing them with dosimeters, a city official said.

Spring, Sakura and Suicide

In the beautiful season of spring, under a bed of Sakura petals, there is a hidden facet of life here that the Japan media and the state do little to publicize — the surging suicide rate among evacuees.

Local counselors in northeast Japan agree that suicide cases among the evacuees in temporary houses is rising due to their isolated and hopeless situation after being evacuated from their communities.

The National Police Agency (NPA) announced in January, however, that the three disaster-affected prefectures of Iwate, Miyagi and Fukushima boasted a record-low suicide rate in the decade until 2011. Citing the NPA, the Mainichi newspaper on January 11th reported suicide figures for the year 2011: Iwate (400), Miyagi (483) and Fukushima (525). The national average for the year per prefecture was 652. In 2010, the figure for suicides in Iwate was 467, in Miyagi 620 and in Fukushima 540.[2]

However, many people in the devastated areas are suspicious of the official statistics. Has the government fabricated the figure to avoid panic? Why is the suicide rate in Tohoku so low despite the fact that articles even in the mainstream media have highlighted the problem of suicides in temporary housing?

Domae Syogo, who heads a local NGO called "Kyodo-No-Tsudoi Net" in Iwaki city, 40 kms from the radiation exclusion zone, does not believe the government's figure. He reports that at least 50 people have taken their own lives in temporary houses in Iwaki city. The elderly are the most vulnerable. "In most cases, the evacuees live in isolation and lack communication with others. They choose to die by starvation, refusing to eat." Domae himself has been a witness to inspections conducted after the suicide of an evacuee.

Domae says that the official suicide figures have been fabricated to save face. "Nobody in the bureaucracy wants to take responsibility for the deaths of these people. In order to conceal their fault, police and city officials press hard for cover-ups, such as by classifying the suicides as accidents or death from sickness."

Suicide cases are expected to grow. Dr. Noda Fumitaka, a psychiatrist at Yotsuya Yui Clinic in Tokyo, explains why. "In the first year after the disaster, people do not have enough room to consider their own psychological health as they are striving so hard to restore their material lives to where they were before the disaster. What they lost returns to them with the strongest impact at around the first-year anniversary."

"Mental care, especially during this crucial period is vital and we need to take care of these people," he stresses. At the same time, the number of volunteers coming to Fukushima and northeast Japan has plummeted and many volunteer groups face bankruptcy and the shutdown of their activities for want of donations and staff.

A Crime Wave in the Wake of Disaster

Behind the doors, in Iwaki city, there is another story that rarely appears openly in the media. Violent crimes conducted by nuclear workers at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant.

Iwaki city is the staging area for workers from the plant. Every three months, hundreds of new faces have been coming to the city in rotation; the average period that a worker can work on site is about three months due to the cap on radiation exposure.

Local people near Iwaki's downtown area complain that the atmosphere and security in their district has changed dramatically for the worse because of these workers. On January 12th, when I tried to tour the entertainment areas of the city's downtown at around 9 p.m., three female high school students stopped me. "Never go there alone," they warned. There have been so many rapes in the Tamachi district because stressed-out nuclear workers have been attacking girls!"

One of the girls, 16-year-old Kikuchi Maki, told me the story about an incident involving her 19-year-old friend last April. She said her friend was raped by a man who looked like a nuclear worker in a back alley when she was alone after saying goodbye to her friends downtown between 1:00-2:00 a.m. Although she reported the rape, a policeman in his fifties refused to accept her complaint and sent her home. The three girls said that such rapes were unheard of before 3.11. They have become very cautious even during daytime, avoiding visiting the downtown district alone.

That story is likely the tip of the iceberg. In Iwaki's entertainment district, there are many similar stories and rumors of rape by nuclear workers whose victims include young hostesses and even the elderly manager of a bar. Alongside the rape cases, Mr. Saito a local resident in his early thirties who works at the Fukushima Daiichi plant tells of a friend who was beaten up by four or five unfamiliar people who spoke the Kyushu dialect. He said the assault, which took place one late night last August after a friend's wedding, was carried out with a wooden sword and required hospitalization. Saito is sure that the assaulters were nuclear workers.

According to the testimony of residents in the downtown area, nuclear workers have become quieter since last August partly because their companies have slapped a curfew at their hotels after 21:00 and also because temporary houses were built last August to accommodate them.

When I searched for articles on "Rape" and "Iwaki" from the period of March 11th, 2011 to today, I found not a single result. Yet local people claim that these crimes have occurred. Fujinami Keiko, a mother of a high school girl, explained why journalists have not publicized these cases: "The Japanese media do not want to escalate the confrontation against TEPCO, a major sponsor, by picking up on the crimes of their subcontracted workers."

In Hirono, which hosts the J-Village temporary crisis center, some residents believe that nuclear workers were responsible for a string of thefts inside the red zone. The owner of an inn that accommodates dozens of these workers confided: "I am sure that the thefts have been done by the nuclear workers. In my inn, I see many suspicious people with tattoos and so on." Rumors are also rife about yakuza who enter the red zone to steal new cars and even expensive pets.

" A nuclear worker who was in charge of supervising the construction site under Kajima Construction company commented: "The thieves are 'nuclear workers'. Putting the entry-permit issued by TEPCO on the front window of a car means that any nuclear worker can easily pass the security checkpoint. It is very hard to catch them." In fact, there has not been a single news story about the arrest of nuclear workers for theft within the prohibited zone.

On the one hand, such charges may express the inclination of local people to blame crime on outsiders. On the other hand, we know from places like Okinawa that a concentration of men constrained to tough discipline and stressful working conditions might provoke such crimes. And Fukushima Daiichi has indeed become another war front.

Young Nuclear Workers at Risk

Another aspect of the Daiichi story has not been adequately discussed: the growing number of young nuclear subcontract workers. Approximately half of the workers at the plant since last August are aged 19-35. A radiation expert who has checked hundreds of workers for a major construction company told me that young workers are favored because they can endure physically demanding tasks like lifting heavy objects and climbing heights.

"Older laborers are not useful at all," a radiation expert said. A 33-year-old nuclear worker in charge of treating the contaminated water at the Daiichi plant indicated that the number of young workers from across Japan has rapidly increased since last summer. "It is double the pay of a normal construction job," he said. "They make themselves believe that everything will be all right since others the same age are already there".

High unemployment in rural areas appears to be playing a role in boosting the numbers of young nuclear workers. Last December, at newly constructed temporary houses in J-Village, Hirono town, I met dozens of young nuclear workers aged 19-23, originally from Niigata prefecture. They said that they came to Fukushima Daiichi because there was no work at home.

Since the 3.11 memorial event in March, newspaper and TV coverage of nuclear issues and nuclear workers have sharply declined. Will they too be forgotten as the government and TEPCO align their agenda?

Continuous Dumping of Contaminated Water

Possibly angry at this situation, on April 21st a 62-year-old nuclear worker broke the silence on the continued leakage of contaminated water from Fukushima Daiichi. Speaking to me, he requested anonymity for fear of losing his job. He supervises a construction site aimed at building a new facility to extract radioactive materials such as cesium and strontium from the contaminated water used to cool the plant's crippled reactors. He revealed that the current facility removes only cesium and that other radioactive materials such as strontium cannot be cleaned up.

He expressed astonishment at the scale of the cleanup operation. "You know how much contaminated water is stored at the Fukushima Daiichi site? It is 200,000 tons. It is an enormous amount!" "In reality," he said, raising his voice, "it is impossible to store that much water on site. So, it is obvious that some of the contaminated water has been leaked into the ocean."

TEPCO announced on March 26th, 2012 that approximately 120 tons of water had leaked from a treatment pipe, forcing them to halt operating the treatment facility. Thi was the second time in two weeks that contaminated water leaked from the nuclear power plant.[3]

After being used to cool the reactors, the water contains massive amounts of radioactive substances and is put into the water-processing facility so it can be recycled for use as a coolant. "Everyone there knows that the amount of water is huge but does not speak about it. Anyone who works there understands that nothing can be done except to leak the water!" he stressed. "Everyone criticizes North Korea for its missiles. But what about Japanese morality? The contamination will spread all over the world, reaching to Kamchatka, Hawaii and the U.S. soon," he added.

Toward the end of our conversation, he said, "You know, in Japan, there is 'honne' (honest feeling) and '*tatemae*' (polite-face). "Our *tatemae* is that we are doing our utmost to stop the leakage of contamination, and our *honnne* is that we are dumping massive amounts of contaminated water into the ocean."

After hearing his testimony, on April 25th I watched Japan's Nippon TV special program, "Continued Days of Inspection: The Safety of Tap Water." The program focused on the efforts made by the Water Bureau of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government to deal with concerns over radioactive materials in the water. Officials spoke while the screen showed TV crews at the bureau's site examining the cleanup of radioactive materials. A mother of small children who refuses to drink tap water and instead buys bottled water appeared as a consumer representative. The water official held a lump of soil taken from the water facility and said: "Even though we found 38 becquerels of cesium per kilogram, this is below government standards. So, we can safely drink the water." The announcer stated that the Tokyo Water Bureau updates its water examination every day on their website.

The Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare in December announced a new standard for safe drinking water of 10 becquerels of cesium per kilogram. The ministry had previously set a provisional standard of 200 becquerels per kilogram (cesium), 300 bec (iodine), 20 bec (uranium) and 1 bec (plutonium) for drinking water, according to the official press release on March 17th.[4]

At the end of the program, a young male announcer concluded saying, "I have an impression that there is still a gap between the endeavors of the water bureau and the mentality of consumers. Today, also, no radioactive materials were detected in the water."

Reflecting on the nuclear whistleblower who warned about the Daiichi cleanup, we must ask whether this assurance of the safety of Tokyo's tap wateris 'tatemae' or 'honnne'?

Makiko SEGAWA is a freelance journalist based in Japan, as well as a translator and guide to overseas media. Her clients include France 24, *The Wall Street Journal* and other European television production companies such as RAI TV, the U.K Performgroup, AB International and Seven Saint Production. She can be contacted at makikosegawa@gmail.com

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Notes

[1] See here.

[2] NPA Statistics: see here and here.

[3] See here.

[4] See here and here.