

Stories & Facts from Fukushima

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About this newsletter

A Case Story

Voluntary evacuees from Fukushima are put in difficult positions

Emiko Fujioka



Yasuhiro Abe, General Manager of the Forum Fukushima Movie Theater, is one of the voluntary evacuee families. His wife and daughters are currently living in Kyoto as evacuees. ©Fukuden

Termination of housing assistance shakes up lives of voluntary evacuees

In mid-May 2015, four years and two months after the accident at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, news began to spread concerning events that would cause difficulty to the lives of many victims seeking refuge outside of Fukushima due to the nuclear disaster. Regarding voluntary evacuees, namely those who had left the disaster area without evacuation orders from the government following the accident, the decision has been taken by Fukushima Prefecture to terminate the provision of free housing by March 2017.

As of May, there were approximately 115,000 evacuees both inside and outside of Fukushima Prefecture due to the nuclear accident –36,000 of whom are thought to be voluntary evacuees as a result of the incident at the nuclear plant.

On May 15th Fukushima Governor Uchibori announced the discontinuation of housing assistance, and also provided information about the support measures that would be available following the termination. However, these support measures were based on the assumption that the evacuees would return to the prefecture, including only subsidies for moving expenses and assistance with rental payments of privately leased housing for low-income households. There were no support measures available for victims wanting to continue their evacuation outside of the prefecture. Any requests by voluntary evacuees and support groups to extend housing support were ignored.

Four years living separately: a husband in Fukushima, his wife and daughter in Kyoto

The family of 52-year-old Yasuhiro Abe, General Manager of the Forum Fukushima movie theater in Fukushima City, is one of the voluntary evacuee families that will be significantly affected by this new decision. Abe's wife and his daughter, who is in her first year of junior high school, are currently living in Kyoto as evacuees.

“As someone doing business in this town, I can understand this way of thinking if I apply my common sense as an adult.

But on the other hand, as a father, I could not imagine having my daughter here.”

Right after the nuclear accident in March 2011, Abe's family relied on connections with friends to take shelter in Yamagata and Hokkaido. While Abe returned to Fukushima several weeks later to resume working, his wife and daughter rented a room in the Aizu region of Fukushima, which had relatively little radiation and where they lived for about three months. However, at that time even in Aizu, sports days and other similar school events were resumed amid airborne radiation levels of two to three microsieverts in the schoolyards. Put off by the school's and the community's lack of risk awareness, Abe decided to have his wife and daughter evacuate to Kyoto through an introduction from one of the family friends they had taken shelter with earlier.

Abe's daughter, who was a 9-year-old attending third grade of elementary school at the time of the accident, is now 14 and in her second year of junior high school. Their estranged double lives have continued now for over four years. Although Abe contacts his wife almost every day over the phone or through e-mail, the distance from Fukushima to Kyoto is over 700 km. They cannot see each other all that frequently. If he has time, Abe will drive his car the eight or nine hours to Kyoto, but the reality is that he can only make this journey maybe once a month, if that.

Two contradicting selves

“Going back and forth between Kyoto, I can feel the change in perception towards radiation. Living in Fukushima City every day, you quickly start to become uninterested in the low levels of radiation. It's frightening,” says Abe.



Shinobu Mountain, which is known as a scenic spot in Fukushima city, is now used as a temporary storage site of the bags containing radiation-tainted grass and soil from the cleanup (decontamination) work in commercial and residential area. ©Fukuden

“After the nuclear accident, even though there were some areas in Fukushima City where the radiation levels were quite high, no evacuation order was issued. Why is that? The reason is that 300,000 people live there. It’s a completely different story compared to towns and villages of a few thousand. Where are they going to evacuate all of these people? As someone doing business in this town, I can understand this way of thinking if I apply my common sense as an adult. But on the other hand, as a father, I could not imagine having my daughter here. There are two parts of myself that contradict each other.”

With many unknown elements in terms of the effects of radiation on humans, the children living in Fukushima will harbor lifelong concerns about their health. Abe says that is extremely unfair.

“One out of every three Japanese people dies from cancer. I’m sure it is always hard to pinpoint the cause, but if the time came for the children living in Fukushima to die from this disease, I’m sure that they would be likely to wonder whether it was caused by them being in Fukushima. Why is it that only the children in Fukushima will have to go through that?”

But it was not only the radiation that Abe did not want to expose his daughter to.

“A government that doesn’t look the reality of radioactive contamination in the face... People who mask their feelings and play along, acting cool on the surface while not being able to voice the concerns lying at the bottom of their hearts... I wanted to remove my daughter from that kind of society.”

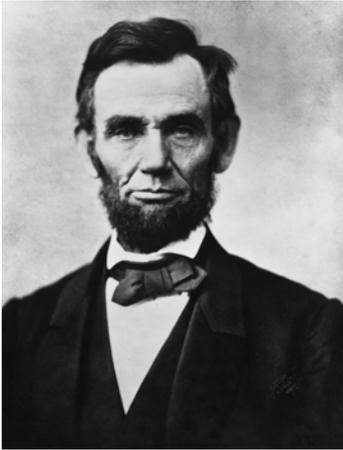
No Lincoln for the Nuclear Disaster Victims’ Support Act

Even now, four and a half years after the nuclear accident, decontamination has not even been started on over 30% of the residential areas in Fukushima City.

“There are micro-hotspots here and there even in the areas that have been decontaminated once, but the government doesn’t care. Children like going into the forest and bushes, searching for bugs or building secret forts —even though those places might be micro-hotspots.”

While disillusioned by the stance taken by the government and citizens when faced with the reality of radiation exposure, one event that moved Abe emotionally was the enactment of the Nuclear Disaster Victims’ Support Act¹,

1. The Nuclear Disaster Victims’ Support Act (Official name: Act concerning the promotion of measures to provide living support to the Victims, including the children who were affected by the TEPCO Nuclear Accident in order to protect and support their lives) - See more at: <http://fukushimaontheglobe.com/the-earthquake-and-the-nuclear-accident/nuclear-disaster-victims-support-act>



*Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865)
16th President of the United States*

The movie "Lincoln" takes place in between when Lincoln was re-elected to be the President, until he was assassinated.

In order for the Emancipation Proclamation to become a reality, Lincoln puts everything on the line to form the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution.

a law that was passed in June 2012 thanks to the efforts of non-partisan members of the Diet—in particular their women members. Taking a page from the Chernobyl Act established after the accident at Chernobyl, the law—which acknowledges both the right to take shelter and the right to stay, and which clearly specifies the need for support measures in either case—was a ray of hope especially for those in contaminated areas like Fukushima City, where no evacuation orders were issued.

However, this law which had been initiated and passed by the lawmakers was watered down when deciding on the basic direction for implementation, and its principles were hardly put into use to actually support the disaster victims.

Abe adds that around that time was when he had watched the film “Lincoln.”

“The Nuclear Disaster Victims’ Support Act and the American Emancipation Proclamation have some overlap. Lincoln realized that a declaration expressing principles was not enough to change reality, so he used all means available to include the abolition of slavery into the constitution, putting his political career on the line. Unfortunately, there was no Lincoln for the Nuclear Disaster Victims’ Support Act.”

The Tokyo Olympics lies behind the inevitable new increase in voluntary evacuees

The Reconstruction Agency released a revised draft of the basic policies for the Nuclear Disaster Victims’ Support Act on July 10th, 2015, saying of areas eligible for support that, “Today, just over four years after the breakout of the nuclear accident, based on airborne radiation levels and the like, it would be appropriate to reduce in size or abolish the areas eligible for assistance. With the exception of the zones that are under evacuation orders, no areas are in a state requiring evacuation.”

The announcement did not touch on specific radiation level standards, nor did it touch on the fact that already over 100 children, who were 18 years old or younger at the time of the accident in Fukushima, have developed thyroid cancer. The agency continues to repeat, “Our position as the Reconstruction Agency is to support the general position of Fukushima Prefecture to aim for its citizens’ return.”



In preparation for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, construction work in various metropolitan areas is progressing.

While many evacuees' concerns towards radiation have not been cleared away, policies that assume the return of evacuees are picking up speed. The government has adopted a policy of removing evacuation orders except for the difficult-to-return areas by March 2017, which will coincide with the termination of housing assistance and compensation where evacuees have sought shelter. There are a number of households that would not wish to return even with evacuation orders removed, including households with children, so an increase in new voluntary evacuees is inevitable.

Behind the government's push to force the return of citizens to Fukushima to this point lies the Tokyo Olympics, scheduled to be held in 2020. At the IOC Session for the Olympic bid, Prime Minister Abe asserted that, "The Fukushima Daiichi Power Plant has been totally under control and there is no concern whatsoever of adverse effects." It is widely perceived that the Prime Minister wants to dismiss the effects of the accident at the Fukushima Daiichi Power Plant as much as possible by the start of the Olympics and give the impression that "the recovery is complete."

Policies enabling people to live as Fukushima citizens without being in Fukushima

For the time being, Abe plans to somehow sustain his family's current separate living situation between Fukushima and Kyoto until his daughter graduates from high school, even if his rent subsidy is terminated. However, even if his wife wanted to work in Kyoto to support the family budget, the reality is that once she is discovered to be an evacuee from Fukushima, no one will hire her on the grounds that they will never know when she will return home to Fukushima. And it is not just Abe –the children of families taking shelter outside of Fukushima have all made friends and studied at schools where they evacuated.

"When I think about the future, the first thing that comes to mind is the age of my child. I'm sure other families are the same way." How many more years until my child graduates? What are we going to do about continuing education after graduation? Families with children cannot think about life moving forward without thinking about these things.

"I'd like for the national and prefecture-level governments to not just lump all of the evacuees together, but to listen to the individual situations of each family. I'd also like for them to think of policies that do not stand solely on the Fukushima victims being in the prefecture." Abe says he would like to see children in Fukushima increasingly leave the prefecture and do great things.

"Even in the past, many Fukushima natives who did great things left the prefecture once. Just because you don't continue to stay in Fukushima does not mean that you cannot talk about Fukushima. I'd like for these children to do great things around Japan and the world while still holding on to their identity as Fukushima natives."

"I'd like for the national and prefecture-level governments to not just lump all of the evacuees together, but to listen to the individual situations of each family."

"I'd also like for them to think of policies that do not stand solely on the Fukushima victims being in the prefecture."

Background Facts

Ahead of the fifth anniversary of the nuclear accident, policies for returning victims home pick up speed

Since the spring of 2015, the government's handling of the victims of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant accident and its future plans have become apparent. Policies such as the early lifting of evacuation orders and termination of housing assistance were announced. It was similarly announced that TEPCO's compensation for psychological damage and loss of business would be terminated.

The following are the policy announcements by the government, Fukushima prefecture and Tokyo Electric Power Co. (TEPCO) that have been released since June, as well as their key points.

June12	The cabinet decided the revision of Fukushima Reconstruction Guidelines
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Decontamination work is continuing so that the orders to evacuate from “areas to which evacuation orders are ready to be lifted” and “areas in which the residents are not permitted to live” can be lifted by March 2017 at the latest. - Regardless of when the orders are lifted, TEPCO will be compelled to compensate for psychological damage and loss of business until the end of March 2018.
June15	Fukushima Prefecture announced that the housing assistance for voluntary evacuees would be lifted
	-Housing assistance for voluntary evacuees and evacuees from the areas where evacuation orders have already been lifted will be terminated at the end of March 2017.
June17	TEPCO issued a press release on the compensation for psychological damage and loss of business
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Compensation to businesses that experienced loss of business and reputation, up to and including the 2016 portion will be paid at once (equivalent to twice the annual lost profits), at which point the compensation will come to an end. - Compensation for psychological damage to evacuees from evacuation zones other than the "difficult-to-return" zones (amounting to 100,000yen per month) will end in March 2018.
July10	Reconstruction Agency announced revision of the basic policy of the Nuclear Victims' Support Act
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The document states, "Now, four years since the disaster occurred, based on airborne radiation levels, etc., the evacuation zones other than the 'difficult-to-return' zones no longer require evacuation, and it would be appropriate to reduce or repeal assistance programs in such zones." (<i>*reference value of the radiation level for the decision was not shown</i>) - The document also states that the decision to end the provision of emergency temporary housing by the end of 2017 is "consistent with the reduction in airborne radiation levels, etc."

**note by the editor*

Background Facts

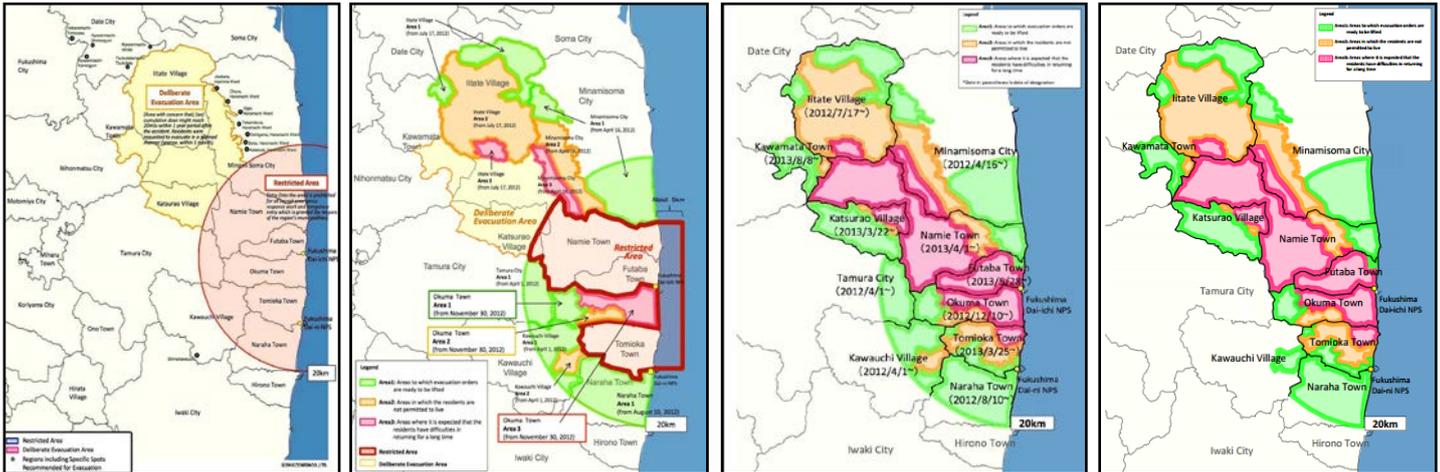
The government is lifting evacuation orders but few people return

Nov. 2011

Nov, 2012

Aug, 2013

Oct, 2014



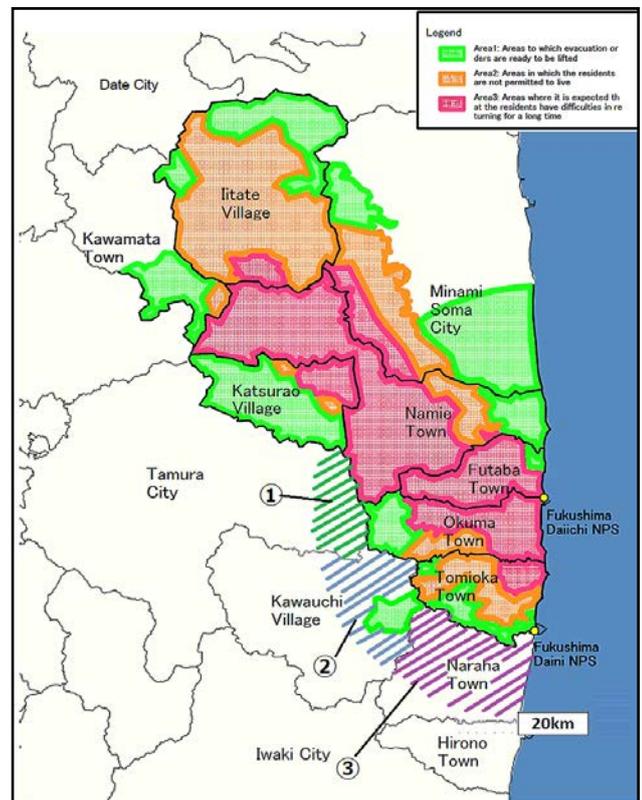
↑ The former restricted areas had been rearranged into 3 different areas according to the radiation level

Since April 2014, the government has been gradually lifting evacuation orders to the green areas in the map, which is called “areas to which evacuation orders are ready to be lifted,” where radiation level is under 20mSv/year.

In spite of the effort of each municipality, not many people are willing to return to their home soon because of their concern about radiation’s affect to their health, inconvenience caused by the lack of infrastructure, etc.

However, the government is planning to lift evacuation orders to all the evacuation areas except “difficult-to-return areas” (red zone) by the end of March 2017.

Aug, 2015



Maps: from the website of Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (some information added by the editor to the map of Aug 2015)

⇒To see the details of these maps, see our website

Fukushima on the Globe

“Evacuation orders and restricted area”

<http://fukushimaontheglobe.com>

Area name	Date of lifting evacuation order	Number of the people who returned /total population	% of returned household
① Miyakoji District, Tamura City 	April 2014	76 /112 household 198/ 340 people (as of 31/8/2015)	67.9%
② East area of Kawauchi village 	October 2014	29/139 household 50/274 people (as of 1/10/2015)	20.9%
③ Naraha Town (Whole town had been evacuated) 	September 2015	203/2700 household 321/7400 people (as of 20/10/2015)	7.5%

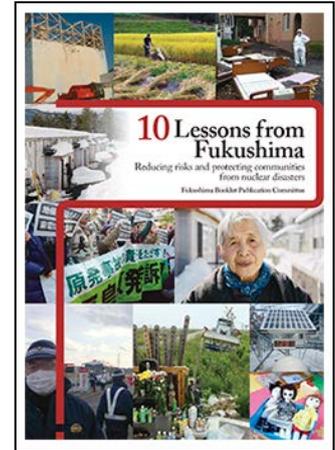
Table: Situation of the former restricted areas to which evacuation orders were recently lifted

Chart: made by the editor Data Source: The Asahi Shimbun Oct.24, 2015

Information

Booklet “10 Lessons from Fukushima: Reducing risks and protecting communities from nuclear disasters” now available in 7 languages !

We have created a booklet entitled “10 Lessons from Fukushima: Reducing risks and protecting communities from nuclear disasters”. This booklet, which is based upon the experiences and testimony of local people, outlines the reality of the Fukushima nuclear disaster, ten lessons from this which should be shared for considering future response and prevention. Originally published in Japanese, It is now translated into 6 different languages, English, French, Chinese, Korean, Spanish and Turkish(Turkish version is translated independently by the Chamber of Electrical Engineers of Turkey).



This booklet was created through collaboration by many NGOs and researchers working to support those affected by the Fukushima nuclear power plant disaster in various ways.

To browse and download the contents, see ⇒ <http://fukushimalessons.jp/en-booklet.html>

About this news letter

Stories & Facts from Fukushima is a newsletter presenting real stories of Fukushima and its background after the nuclear disaster of Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant happened on Mar.11, 2011.

Having more than 4 years passed since the disaster, this newsletter aims to introduce present situation of Fukushima people (both

living inside and outside Fukushima) and to explain the facts behind their life.

Some of the contents are linked to our website, Fukushima on the Globe (www.fukushimaonthe-globe.com). Please see the site as well as this newsletter.

We welcome your feedback.

Acknowledgement

Our project is supported by the organizations as below:



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