

# Japan's nuclear evacuees face bleak future

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25 April 2011

Last week the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) announced a roadmap for bringing four damaged reactors at its Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear plant to cold shutdown within six to nine months. The Japanese government has made clear that stabilising the reactors is a precondition for allowing tens of thousands of evacuees from the exclusion zone around the plant to return home.

However, given the complexity of the technical problems involved, there is no guarantee that TEPCO will meet its target. The government has announced no plans for resettling evacuees and has now imposed a complete ban on entry into the 20-kilometre exclusion zone. Previously, former residents were permitted to return to their homes for short periods to retrieve possessions.

Nearly 80,000 people have been forced to evacuate, with 30,000 relocated outside Fukushima prefecture. Now, despite strong protests from local mayors, the government has extended the exclusion zone to include the villages of Iitate and Katsurao, the town of Namie, and parts of Kawamata and the city of Minami-Soma. Residents have a month to evacuate.

Another 62,400 people, who lived between 20 to 30 kilometres from the plant before the accident, were asked initially to remain indoors as much as possible. Now all of these people have been asked to leave voluntarily.

Futaba, one of the “ghost towns” inside the 20-kilometre zone, was visited by *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daisuke Wakabayashi last week. While much of the town remained intact, people are missing from the empty streets. Mayor Katsutaka Idogawa admitted that it would take “years” before residents could return

home.

Prime Minister Naoto Kan reportedly declared on April 13 that the evacuation zone would be uninhabitable for the next 10-20 years due to prolonged radioactivity. He later denied the comment, but many people distrust the government and its handling of the nuclear crisis.

Kenji Matsueda, 49, who is living in an evacuation centre in Fukushima, told *Business Week*: “Well, this year is lost. I have no idea what I will do. Nine months is a long time. And it could be longer. I don’t think they really know.” Another evacuee Yukio Otsuka, 56, said: “I don’t believe a word they say. I don’t trust them. I don’t believe it is possible. We have really drawn the short stick on this one.”

Evacuees are also facing discrimination, based on irrational fears that radiation is somehow contagious. Earlier this month, officials in the city of Tsukuba in Ibaraki prefecture required anyone from Fukushima to provide medical papers or undergo radiation checks before being accepted into temporary shelters. There have been other reports of hotels turning people away and children being bullied.

Residents from the wider evacuation zone have not been provided with government assistance to move, and many removal firms have refused to be involved. “We were told to evacuate, but we can’t. Are [the moving companies] just going to abandon us without offering help?” a 50-year-old woman from Iitatemura, told the *Yomiuri Shimbun*.

Farmers and fishermen both inside and outside the exclusion zone have been affected. Despite the government’s assurances that most of the prefecture’s

agricultural products are safe, many consumers, suspicious of official statements, are not buying the produce. Sadayasu Abe, from Minimisoma, a village 25 kilometres from the nuclear plant, told *Voice of America* that the public stigma against Fukushima's products is the "fourth disaster", after the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear crisis.

A number of countries including Russia, the United States, Taiwan and Singapore have banned food imports from prefectures in Japan close to the Fukushima nuclear plant. During a meeting of trade ministers from Japan, South Korea and China, the Japanese representative called for an easing of restrictions, but was rebuffed by the other two countries.

Those forced to leave their homes from around the Fukushima plant face similar difficulties to the survivors of the March 11 earthquake and tsunami who lost their homes, possessions and, in many cases, family members. The latest death toll is over 14,000, with 13,660 still missing, feared dead. About 150,000 are living in emergency shelters, with many more staying with relatives and friends, or in rented accommodation or hotels.

An emerging problem is psychological trauma. Health professionals have warned that without counselling many survivors could develop depression or other mental illnesses. Ritsuko Nishimae, a clinical psychologist working with Doctors Without Borders, told the AFP: "Many people are now in a phase of acute stress disorder, which is a totally natural response to this level of trauma. If they are not able to get proper support psychologically, there is an increased possibility that they could develop post-traumatic stress disorder."

Of the small number of 115 counsellors sent to the disaster zone, only 25 are doctors. The rest are support staff. Japan has one of the highest rates of suicide in the world, and some 900,000 people are treated annually for depression.

The north-eastern Tohoku region of Japan already confronted economic and social problems before the

earthquake and tsunami. Job seekers outnumber jobs by two to one. Many young people unable to find jobs leave the area, with 25 percent of Tohoku's population over 65.

In the past, national governments have provided short-term economic relief through infrastructure projects as part of broader stimulus packages. However, once construction has finished, the jobs were lost. The region's per capita income of 2.6 million yen a year is 15 percent less than the national average. TEPCO exploited the lack of jobs in the region to sign up maintenance workers for its Fukushima nuclear plant at just \$11 an hour—about the same pay as in fast-food outlets in Tokyo.

Prime Minister Kan has promised to rebuild the disaster zone. But an advisor, Takayoshi Igarashi, explained in a recent interview: "To put it very crudely, there won't be a lot of people left in these communities. Old people will pass away and the young will surely leave for Tokyo. The government now faces this awful choice of whether to invest in rebuilding these areas or leaving them behind."



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