

Two years after earthquake

North eastern Japan still a disaster zone

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Two years ago today, northern Japan was hit by a devastating magnitude 9.0 earthquake, triggering a tsunami that flattened dozens of coastal towns and a crisis at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant. Nearly 19,000 people were killed or went missing, presumed dead, according to official figures.

The north eastern region, known as Tohoku, remains a disaster zone, with reconstruction barely begun in many areas. A third of a million evacuees are still living in temporary accommodation, which was meant to be for two years only, and have no immediate prospect of resettlement. The exclusion zones around the nuclear plant are likely to remain in place for many years. The decommissioning of the crippled Daiichi plant is now expected to take up to 40 years.

The fate of the victims of the Great East Japan Earthquake is an indictment of capitalism. Japan is a technologically-sophisticated economy, the world's third largest, but reconstruction is proceeding at a snail's pace. Only 8 trillion yen of the 25 trillion yen (\$268 billion) in planned reconstruction funds has been allocated. Of that, only half has been spent, in some cases on projects unrelated to the disaster.

Media reports published in the lead up to the second anniversary provide snapshots of the bleak situation facing survivors. Even before the earthquake, Tohoku was an economically depressed region.

Associated Press reported on the coastal town of Rikuzentakata. About three quarters of its 8,000 homes, along with businesses and infrastructure, were flattened by the 13-metre tsunami that swept over the area. Nothing permanent has been rebuilt. In late February, work finally began on the first public housing project. Few businesses have restarted in the town, which relied previously on oyster farming, fish processing and tourism. Mayor Futoshi Toba said: "If 10 years from

now we only have 2,000 people living here, that won't do."

An Independent Online article explained that nearly 40 percent of the population of the coastal city of Ishinomaki, or 74,000 people, were still living in temporary accommodation. Older survivors were relying on volunteers and charity for food. Alcoholism and depression were on the rise. Many young people had moved away as there was no future in the city.

In the Fukushima area, the situation is worse. According to *Asahi Shimbun*, some 54,000 people, or about 60 percent of the evacuees from the exclusion zone, will not be able to return to their homes for at least another four years due to ongoing nuclear contamination. These include the towns of Okuma and Futaba, near the nuclear plant, as well as Namie and Tomioka.

In an interview with *Die Welt*, Greenpeace nuclear expert Heinz Smital said the official assessments of decontamination were too optimistic. He expressed "grave concerns" about former residents moving back to highly contaminated areas, saying that it was more likely that they would never be allowed to return.

The *Japan Times* spoke to evacuees from the town of Namie living in temporary housing, all of whom indicated that they did not want to return because of concerns about the radiation levels. However, government authorities are continuing to plan for the town's re-establishment and provide no assistance to those who want to move out.

Nor has compensation from the owner of the nuclear plant, Tokyo Electric Power Company (Tepco), been finalised, leaving the victims in limbo. Last year the corporation threatened to halve its monthly hardship payments of 100,000 yen to Namie evacuees, but was forced to back off after a protest campaign.

From the outset, Tepco sought to cover up the extent of the disaster, which involved partial meltdowns in three of the six nuclear reactors. Power was cut off to the plant after the earthquake and the tsunami swamped emergency back-up generators that were inadequately protected. Temperatures in the reactor cores quickly spiked. Hydrogen explosions damaged the reactor buildings and exposed a used fuel rod cooling pond. A far worse catastrophe was only narrowly averted by establishing makeshift cooling systems.

Two years later, the clean-up and decommissioning of the plant have only just begun. Plant manager Takeshi Takahashi told journalists recently: “What we need to do is isolate and store the damaged and broken nuclear fuel safely. This work will take 30 to 40 years to complete.”

The Japanese government announced in December 2011 that the three damaged reactors had reached the state of “cold shutdown”. However, before the damaged nuclear fuel can be removed, it has to be located—a major task given the partial meltdown of the reactor cores. The conditions inside the three reactor buildings are too dangerous for workers to enter. In the case of reactor 3, the operation is further complicated by the use of highly toxic MOX (a mixture of plutonium and uranium) as nuclear fuel. Remotely-controlled robotic systems must be used.

Another major problem is posed by the huge quantities of water pumped into the reactor cores to keep them cool. In normal operation, the water used to cool the reactor is recycled with a closed system. But the damage to the reactors meant that water had to be supplied continuously as it leaked out. Tepco now has 260,000 tonnes of highly contaminated water stored in tanks, the capacity for about 60,000 tonnes more, and no functioning system for processing and disposing of the water. Its storage capacity will be reached within months.

Given the length of the decommissioning process, there are also concerns about another catastrophe if the plant were hit again by an earthquake. A nuclear engineer at the plant told the *Australian*: “What remained intact after the disaster is completely fragile and when the next one [quake or tsunami] comes it’s going to collapse. It [the plant] remains very vulnerable.”

Despite the many questions that remain about the

Fukushima nuclear disaster, the newly elected government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is preparing to restart more of Japan’s reactors, all of which were shut down amid widespread fears over nuclear safety. The crisis exposed Tepco’s long record of safety breaches and cover-ups as well as the cosy relations between energy companies with nuclear regulators.

The previous prime minister, Yoshihiko Noda, provoked large protests when he restarted two of the country’s 54 nuclear reactors. Abe declared in the Japanese parliament on February 28 that reactors which pass new safety guidelines could restart within a year. While he declared there would be “no compromise” on safety, the safety changes are limited. Abe’s right-wing Liberal Democratic Party, which ruled Japan for most of the past 60 years, is responsible for the lax nuclear safety regulation that led to the Fukushima disaster.



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