Inside Fukushima's Potemkin Village: Naraha

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Twice a year, journalists are taken on guided tours of the ruined Daiichi nuclear plant, operated by Tokyo Electric Power Co (TEPCO). The drive there from the southern outskirts of the 20-kilometer exclusion zone imposed in 2011 took them through the nearly empty towns of Hirono, Naraha, Tomioka, Okuma and Futaba. The state of neglect could be measured by the encroachment of weeds and wild animals, and the slow decrepitude of housing and infrastructure.

Despite the decline and the still urgent beeping of Geiger counters nearer the plant, there has never been any official talk of abandoning the area. Instead, it was divided up into three zones with awkward euphemisms to suggest just the opposite: communities with radiation of 20 millisieverts (mSv) or less (the typical worldwide limit for workers in nuclear plants) are “being prepared for lifting of evacuation order;” 20-50 mSv are “no-residence zones;” the most heavily contaminated (50mSv) are “difficult-to-return.”

A vast public-works project was started three years ago to decontaminate an area roughly half the size of Rhode Island, at an estimated cost of $50 billion. Compensation by TEPCO was explicitly linked to the possibility that many of the 160,000 nuclear refugees would return, and any hint otherwise was controversial: When new trade and industry minister Hachiro Yoshio called the abandoned communities “towns of death” in September 2011, he was forced to quit a week later.

In September 2015, Naraha, 15km south of the plant, became the first town in Fukushima Prefecture to completely lift the evacuation order imposed after the Daiichi plant's triple meltdown. At a ceremony to mark the town’s reopening, Mayor Matsumoto Yukiei declared the nightmare that had descended nearly five years ago officially over. “The clock that stopped has now begun to tick”, he said. Explaining the decision, Takagi Yosuke, state minister of economy, trade and industry, said contamination was “not dangerous enough to continue forcing evacuation on residents who want to return home.”

That explanation somewhat inverts reality. A Reconstruction Agency survey conducted last year of evacuees from Okuma, Tomioka, Futaba and the town of Namie, northwest of the plant, found that just one-fifth wanted to go back to their homes. Thousands of refugees have reluctantly made lives elsewhere and fear that
their nuclear compensation, amounting to a
monthly stipend of 100,000 yen ($837), will be
terminated if they refuse to go back to areas
declared safe. Many feel they’re being pushed
back, not invited.

Naraha is almost entirely state-funded. It has a
publicly built shopping centre, a new
kindergarten and a secondary school under
construction. A new factory on the outskirts of
town will design and test robots for use in
decommissioning the ruined plant. A team of
decontamination workers has been sent to
every house - in some cases several times. Free
dosimeters are distributed to residents who
return, so they can measure airborne radiation.
Water at the local water filtration plant is
tested hourly, says Igari Yusuke, a local
government spokesman. “We probably have the
safest tap water in Japan,” he says.

Igari Yusuke: spokesman for Naraha Town Office

All that’s missing are people: fewer than 200 of
the town’s 7,400 residents have returned,
admits Igari. Locals say the real number is
much smaller. “Some came and left again,”
says Yamauchi Kazuo, who is visiting relatives
nearby. “There’s nothing here for them.” The
town is bustling with men in uniform, mostly
construction workers or local government
officials who will eventually move on. The
returnees include a single young local family,
says Igari, but he declines to introduce them,
citing privacy issues. Instead, we find the
farmhouse of Yamauchi Kohei (79) and Tomoko
(75), who say they have come back for good.

Yamauchi Kohei and Tomoko, elderly couple who
returned to Naraha after the evacuation order was
lifted, inside their house

Like thousands of other evacuees, the elderly
couple fled on the freezing night of March 11,
2011. In the subsequent months, they changed
address six times, living for a while with their
daughter in Nagano Prefecture, southwest of
Tokyo before eventually - like many local
people - ending up in temporary housing in
Iwaki City about 30km south of Naraha. It was
a difficult experience, they recall: apart from
the disruption, the walls of their temporary-
housing unit were paper thin and they could
hear everything said and done by the noisy
family next door.

They returned to their home periodically on government-sanctioned visits, wearing masks, gloves and Hazmat suits, eyeing in despair the impact of the elements on their beloved house. Last year, they were allowed to return during the daylight hours to work on making it livable again. Months of backbreaking work and decontamination later, the weeds are gone and the radiation is down to livable levels – about 0.1 mSv per hour, they say.

The Yamauchi home has been in the family for seven generations. In the room off the genkan or foyer, portraits of Kohei’s ancestors decorate the walls. “I couldn’t just abandon it”, he says. In any case, he adds, he and his wife are too old to care about cancer. Life is not the same as before, of course, but perhaps, little by little it will return to normal, he says. “If we return, perhaps the children will see that everything is alright and they will follow us.”

Local policeman wearing a dosimeter to measure the radiation that he receives during his work

A few miles up the road, closer to the Daiichi plant, communities are still considered uninhabitable. Local police officers wear dosimeters pinned to their chests in case they stray into danger zones.

Bags with radioactive soil that was collected in the area can be seen in several areas around Naraha town

Hundreds of fields around the prefecture host stacked rows of black 100-kg bags of contaminated earth, stripped from the ground; Naraha alone generated 58,000 such bags, says Igari. Many locals are skeptical that the earth will ever be removed. Though the radiation levels are technically low, mothers are determined to keep their children away, says Kanai Naoko, an evacuee.

The goal of all this work is normalisation. Naraha is a showcase for post-Fukushima Japan, says Igari. “If people won’t return to live here, they won’t return anywhere. We feel a heavy sense of responsibility”. Nobody wants Fukushima mentioned in the same breath as Chernobyl: almost three decades after the world’s worst nuclear accident, life there is still frozen in time, a snapshot of the mid-1980s Soviet Union, complete with posters of Vladimir Lenin on school walls. “The key objective is to communicate to the public that Japan can overcome a nuclear accident,” says Jan Vande Putte, a radiation specialist for the environmental watchdog Greenpeace International. “It’s not economical; it would be a lot cheaper to give people enough money to leave and buy new houses. The goal is political.”
So far, most former residents are not buying it. One element of doubt is radiation. The best result of decontamination is a 50-percent reduction in contamination levels, “sometimes less,” says Vande Putte. The other issue is linked to infrastructure, particularly hospitals, doctors and shops. Within a year, Naraha will have a new government-funded clinic, the new school will have opened; radiation in most places will have fallen to near-normal levels. But will families return? Igari smiles uncomfortably. “We like to think they will,” he says. “Perhaps it will take five or ten years. We hope it will happen sooner but it’s difficult to tell.” There’s no question of forcing people back by cutting off their compensation, he insists. But without an extension, the trickle of money is due to end in 2018.

Following the 2011 triple disaster, Japan closed all 53 of its nuclear reactors. A month before Naraha reopened, it fired up a reactor in Kyushu - the first under tougher safety rules introduced after Fukushima. Operators of another two-dozen reactors have applied to restart — the government’s latest energy plan assumes they will eventually provide more than 20 per cent of the nation’s energy mix. But the restarts are unpopular and virtually every one is the focus of a potentially long-drawn out legal dispute over safety. A survey by Reuters, published after the Kyushu restart said that of the other 42 operable reactors in Japan, “just seven are likely to be turned on in the next few years.” Nine reactors are likely to stay off for good and the future of the rest is “uncertain.”

Many of the roughly 120,000 remaining nuclear evacuees, meanwhile, have built new lives elsewhere and are reluctant to return to communities that have fallen into ruin. Worries over radiation complicate an already difficult decision, particularly for those with young children. Though scientists have repeatedly said the decontaminated areas are safe, many distrust those reassurances, says Kanai. Such worries are highlighted by a hotly contested report claiming that rates of thyroid cancer in Fukushima since March 2011 are 20 to 50 times the national level.

Small signs of life give the returnees hope: newspaper deliveries recently restarted and the post office will reopen shortly. Trains are arriving at the local station again – a digital readout displays the radiation level over the ticket counter.

Do locals bear a grudge about what happened? No, says Watanabe Seijun, who manages a local restaurant. When he was a boy, he recalls, his father worked in the summer but had to travel all the way to Tokyo for seasonal work in the winter. The power plant came along in the 1970s and provided a living for many local people. “There’s no point in blaming anyone for what happened, he says.” Yamauchi Kohei agrees. “We just have to look ahead and try to improve our lot. What else can we do.”

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See the accompanying article by Arjkadiusz Podniesiński, Fukushima: The View From
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