

Radiation Disinformation and Human Rights Violations at the Heart of Fukushima and the Olympic Games

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Abstract: In the run up to the 2020 summer Olympics / Paralympics, multiple violations of the human rights of citizens and workers impacted by the Fukushima nuclear disaster persist. UN human rights experts have continued to challenge the Abe government over its record. Ignoring basic scientific principles of radiation protection, the government is deliberately distorting reality on actual contamination, the limited effectiveness and scope of decontamination and risks in Fukushima prefecture. Abe’s disinformation narrative on Fukushima is aimed at erasing the image of Fukushima as the location of one of the world’s nuclear disasters, and, by so doing, reviving the prospects for the nation’s nuclear industry. There remains a window in the coming months for a wider understanding of the complex reality in Fukushima, the ongoing radiological conditions and impacts, and the struggle of tens of thousands of evacuees and workers to secure their legal rights.

Ever since the start of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster in March 2011, many of the issues concerning the rights of evacuees (particularly women and children), citizens, and workers have been raised by United Nations human rights bodies and experts. One of the earliest and most comprehensive was the 2012 Mission Report of Special Rapporteur (SR) Anand Grover. (OHCHR 2013) Eight years later, and in the run up to Japan hosting the 2020 summer Olympics / Paralympics, the violations of citizens’ and workers’ rights continue.

The Abe government has framed the games as the reconstruction Olympics, with a near explicit aim of erasing the image of Fukushima as the location of one of the world’s worst nuclear disasters. During the games themselves, Abe may achieve his objective (at least temporarily) as there is almost no prospect that the wider context of an ongoing radiological emergency will be reported. It’s all about the games and Abe’s disinformation narrative on Fukushima is about to go into hyperdrive. But in the run up to the opening of the Olympics there is a window of opportunity for a wider understanding of the complex reality in Fukushima, the ongoing radiological impact and the struggle of tens of thousands of evacuees and workers to secure their legal rights.

Taking their lead from Grover, during the last two years UN Special Rapporteurs have extended the depth and range of issues they have raised with the Abe government. This escalation of intervention by the Special



Azuma Stadium and Arakawa River, Fukushima City, Christian Aslund/Greenpeace, October 2019

Rapporteurs (SR) has not been well received by the Japanese government. Official country visits by these leading experts in their fields, despite multiple requests sent from the UN in Geneva, remain blocked by the Abe government. A visit to Japan by a UN human rights SR to investigate the conditions for Fukushima citizens and workers impacted by the nuclear disaster would directly challenge Abe's Fukushima whitewash strategy and it's not going to happen in the year of the reconstruction games.

One of the central issues raised by the United Nations is the higher radiation exposure limit set for Fukushima citizens. As a consequence of the widespread contamination resulting from the reactor meltdowns, in particular from radio-caesium, large areas of Fukushima prefecture exceeded the 1milliSievert per year (mSv/y) recommended maximum dose limit for the public. Given the half-life of caesium-137 is 30 years, there is no prospect that in many of the evacuated areas of Fukushima dose rates would return to pre 3/11 levels for several decades and longer. By revising the upper limit to 20mSv/y, and dismissing radiation risks at that level, the government proceeded with lifting evacuation orders for some of the most contaminated areas of Fukushima, including the towns of Namie and Iitate.

There is no scientific basis for the Japanese government to dismiss low dose radiation risks. Dr David Richardson, co-author of the world's largest cohort studies on leukemia risk from low dose radiation exposure (Lancet 2015), has recently stated that five years exposure at 20mSv a year would confer about a 30% excess risk of fatal leukemia.(HBO 2020) The Japanese government is well aware of the risks from low dose radiation - not least as it was one of the funders of the 2015 INWORKS study which found an increase in leukemia rates amongst nuclear workers with annual exposure in the range of 3-5mSv/y.

Adding to the pressure from the international community over the Abe government's Fukushima policies, a human rights Special Rapporteur at the UN General Assembly in October 2018 warned that, "The recommendation to lower acceptable levels of exposure back to 1 mSv/yr was proposed by the Government of Germany and the Government of Japan 'accepted to follow up' on it, according to the UN database. However...the recommendation is not being implemented. Japan has a duty to prevent and minimize childhood exposure to radiation." (OHCHRa 2018). The Rapporteur, Baskut Tuncak, further stated that "The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Japan is a Party, contains a clear obligation on States to respect, protect and fulfill the right of the child to life, to maximum development and to the highest attainable standard of health, taking their best interests into account. This requires State parties such as Japan to prevent and minimize avoidable exposure to radiation and other hazardous substances...(and that) Japan should provide full details as to how its policy decisions in relation to the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear accident, including the lifting of evacuation orders and the setting of radiation limits at 20mSv/y, are not in contravention of the guiding principles of the Convention, including the best interests of the child...The combination of the Government's decision to lift evacuation orders and the prefectural authorities' decision to cease the provision of housing subsidies, places a large number of self-evacuees under immense pressure to return."(OHCHRa 2018)

In conclusion, Baskut stated that, "The gradual lifting of evacuation orders has created enormous strains on people whose lives have already been affected by the worst nuclear disaster of this century. Many feel they are being forced to return to areas that are unsafe, including those with radiation levels above what the Government previously considered safe."

Yet, for the Japanese government there is no acknowledgement that their policies are in violation of the basic human rights their citizens are entitled to have respected. According to Japan's Foreign Ministry, "Lifting of the evacuation order is a measure to make return possible for those who prefer to return, and not a measure to force evacuees to return...the decision of the evacuees as to whether to return to their original places to live or not is entirely up to them. The GoJ does not force them to return nor put any pressure on them to do so..."(MOFA 2018)

The radiological conditions in Fukushima are highly complex and varied but the Abe government has no intention of explaining this reality in the year of the Olympics. Expect to hear a lot more of the distorted and wholly inaccurate propaganda as stated by Reconstruction Minister Watanabe Hiromichi, when he recently told HBO TV, "With the exception of areas deemed difficult to return we have decontaminated the entire area."(HBO 2020)

At least seventy percent of Fukushima is mountainous forest, and with the exception of a few meters along roads there has been no decontamination during the past nine years. Perhaps the largest nuclear decontamination program in history has succeeded in generating 16 million tons of nuclear waste soil(Greenpeace 2017), while failing to decontaminate the majority of the contaminated land and exposing tens of thousands of poorly trained workers to radiation (OHCHRb) at a cost of US\$28 billion (as of FY2018). The contaminated forests remain a long-term source for radio-caesium, including for downstream migration and recontamination. (Ulrich 2016)

When my colleagues and I at Greenpeace surveyed the J-Village sports complex in October 2019, we were not expecting to find radiation hot spots at over 72 micro-Sieverts

per hour - equal to over 1750 times background levels pre 3/11. We notified the Environment Ministry as well as domestic and international Olympic Committees.(Greenpeace 2019a) Although, Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) was ordered to remove this contamination in early December (TEPCO 2019), two weeks later we still measured hotspots in the public areas of J-Village.(Greenpeace 2019b) The chosen location for the start of the Olympic Torch route, the J-Village, lies 20km south of Fukushima Daiichi and in an area considered to have relatively low contamination. From our observations, decontamination has been conducted in this area during the last nine years - yet there are levels of radiation that would be declared an emergency requiring urgent action if inside a nuclear facility. They have yet to be explained by the government. This clearly does not match with Minister Watanabe's claim that "we have decontaminated the entire area", but just as legal obligations to uphold the domestic and international human rights of their citizens are of little concern to the Tokyo government, the radioactive reality of Fukushima can be airbrushed out of existence. The Olympics as seen by Abe provide the perfect platform to advance further its Fukushima nuclear disaster disinformation campaign on the people of Japan and beyond.

The underlying motive for Abe's Fukushima Olympic strategy is to promote a nuclear renaissance. He and many of his colleagues in the Liberal Democratic Party are nostalgic for the pre-3/11 situation when commercial reactors generated nearly 30 percent of the nation's electricity.(Schneider 2019) Compared to 2011, when 54 reactors were available, today only nine reactors have returned to operation (with three of these shutdown due to maintenance and legal challenges), and the industry remains in crisis. Despite passing some of the nuclear regulator safety requirements, (McCurry 2017) TEPCO's

prospects for restarting two of its reactors at the Kashiwazaki-Kariwa nuclear plant remain uncertain. The majority of the citizens of Niigata prefecture, which hosts the seven reactor site, remain strongly opposed to any operations, not least due to the major seismic risks to the safety of the reactors. (Ryall 2017) The causes and consequences of the Fukushima nuclear disaster have been a major factor in framing the thinking of Niigata citizens and this extends throughout Japan where utilities are struggling to restart reactors. The triple reactor meltdown really was a defining moment for public opinion regarding nuclear energy in Japan. Resetting this mindset for Abe, by pretending conditions in Fukushima have returned to normal and welcoming the world's elite athletes to the largest sporting event on the planet is one way to blot out images of explosions sending radioactive plumes spewing from damaged reactors, abandoned towns and hazmat suits. In the short-term Fukushima will receive a positive makeover this summer, but a resumption of large-scale nuclear generation in Japan remains unlikely. The industry is aiming to operate 30-35 reactors by 2030, but a combination of unresolvable safety issues, legal challenges, an aging reactor fleet, and the dire financials of utilities will block this scenario. (Burnie 2016, Mainichi 2020, Schneider 2019, Nikkei 2020). In this sense, Abe's strategy is doomed to failure and there is no sign that the Japanese public can be persuaded to support nuclear energy. Meanwhile, the human rights violations of tens of thousands of evacuees and decontamination workers will continue.

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