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By Norimitsu ONISHI

[*The economist Uchihashi Katsuto recently commented on a phenomenon that he describes as "the collapse of agriculture" in Japan.*

"Already 53 per cent of the national land is made up of 'depopulated marginal areas' (genkai kasochi).

The devastation of the national land proceeds with irresistible force. Once, you could say that the development was uniform across the national land, but now public investment goes exclusively to the cities and the regions are abandoned." (Uchihashi Katsuto, interviewed in JACOM, Japan Agricultural Communications, 23 March 2006.

Here Norimitsu Onishi reports on one of those "villages that have reached their limits." The village of which he writes is within the bounds of Wajima City in Ishikawa Prefecture, towards the extremity of the Noto peninsula, which juts into the Japan Sea in central Honshu. GMc]

OGAMA, Japan This mountain village on the West Coast, withered to eight aging residents, concluded recently that it could no longer go on. So, after months of anguish, the villagers settled on a drastic solution: selling all of Ogama to an industrial waste company from Tokyo, which will turn it into a landfill.

With the proceeds, the villagers plan to pack up everything, including their family graves, and move in the next few years to yet uncertain destinations, most likely becoming the first community in Japan to cease to exist voluntarily.

"I'm sure we're the first ones to have made such a proposal," said Miyasaka Kazuo, 64, the village leader. "It's because there's no future for us here, zero."

On a hill overlooking a field of overgrown bushes, surrounded by the sounds of a running stream and a bush warbler, Miyasaka pointed below with his right index finger. "I never imagined it would come to this," he said. "I mean, those all used to be rice fields."

Ogama's decision, though extreme, points to a larger problem besetting Japan, which has one of the world's fastest- graying societies and whose population began declining last year for the first time. As rural Japan becomes increasingly depopulated, many villages and hamlets like Ogama, along with their traditions and histories, risk vanishing.

Japan is dotted with so many such communities

that academics have coined a term - "villages that have reached their limits" - to describe those with populations that are more than half elderly. Out of 140 villages in Monzen, the municipality that includes Ogama, 40 percent have fewer than 10 households, inhabited mostly by the elderly.

Rural Japan has never recovered from its long recession, unlike urban areas. Many of its commercial main streets have been reduced to what the Japanese call "shuttered streets," and few rural areas have found economic alternatives to the huge public works projects that the long-governing Liberal Democratic Party kept doling out.

During his five years in office, Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro has reduced public works spending that yielded money and jobs to local construction companies.

Koizumi cut subsidies and tax redistribution to local governments, instead giving them the power to collect taxes directly. But rural officials argue that with a decreasing population and few businesses, there are few taxes to collect.

In keeping with a nationwide movement to combine financially squeezed municipalities, Monzen merged with nearby Wajima City in February. In 2000, revenue from the national government to the two municipalities totaled $114 million, accounting for 50 percent of their overall revenue; in 2005, money from the capital fell to $90 million, or 44 percent of revenue.

Kaji Fumiaki, mayor of the merged municipality, said recent changes amounted to a "simple logic of telling the countryside that it should die."

Ogama lies in a valley in a mountain facing the sea, reached by a single-lane road that winds its way through a deep green forest where foxes and raccoon dogs - forest-dwellers that, in Japanese myth, trick human beings by shifting their shapes - are spotted regularly. The road ends here.

The Noto peninsula is being marketed as a major tourist area

Mizushiri Bunzo, 81, a historian in Wajima, said Ogama (whose name means "Big Pot") was the place where monks cleansed themselves before going up Takatsume, a sacred mountain.

After World War II, there were about 30 households here, each with eight or nine people. Today, three couples live in one corner of the village, and two women live alone in another corner. A small hill rises in the center, atop which stands a Shinto shrine whose gate was partly felled by an earthquake years ago.

Small streams flow from the surrounding mountains, keeping the ground here moist and covered with patches of moss. The expanding forest has begun reclaiming once cultivated land, hiding the ruins of abandoned houses, and blocking the sunlight.

"Our house is still standing, thankfully," said Miyasaka Harue, the village leader's wife and, at 61, Ogama's youngest inhabitant. "But when you look at the houses collapsing one after another, you understand what's ahead for your own house."

"We're at a dead-end here," she said in front of her house, where the single- lane road reached its end. "Our children haven't come back, so there's no further growth. We'll just keep getting older."

Her husband first proposed the idea. After retiring as a seaman two decades ago and setting up a roof-waterproofing business, Miyasaka Kazuo said he foresaw Ogama's shrinking future. So about 15 years ago, he began pursuing several possibilities, including turning the area into a golf course. None of the ideas went anywhere until he approached Takeei, a Tokyo industrial waste company, a couple of years ago. Takeei was interested.

Miyasaka summoned the entire village - he became its permanent chief three years ago after Ogama's two other men could no longer take turns as leader because of poor health - and told his neighbors about the offer.

"If young people came back, these villages could go on," Taniguchi Kenichi, 76, said. "But that's not happening. They're all dying out."

This article appeared in the New York Times on April 26, 2006 and at Japan Focus on May 4, 2006. Norimitsu Onishi is the Northeast Asia correspondent for the New York Times.