

Minamata disease exhibit offers lessons to radiation-hit Fukushima

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TOKYO (Kyodo) — An exhibition will be held from Friday through Nov. 20 in Shirakawa, nuclear crisis-hit Fukushima Prefecture, showing how Minamata disease caused by chemical maker Chisso Corp. has affected those living in coastal areas of the Shiranui Sea, including Minamata, Kumamoto Prefecture.

The struggle of the mercury-poisoning disease sufferers will be displayed to those affected by radiation from the crippled Fukushima Daiichi power plant, as both groups have been victimized by corporate activities in the process of Japan's postwar growth and prosperity.

"We, the people in Fukushima Prefecture, now suffer the damage inflicted by money-driven business operations as were the people of Minamata," said Mari Obuchi, a member of the local organizing group of the exhibition. "We hope the visitors to the exhibition will find clues about tackling the radiation issue through the experiences of Minamata."

The whole picture of damage caused by Minamata disease, including the number of victims, remains unclear even 55 years after its official recognition, partly because a health survey of affected areas has not been carried out, experts point out.

As one lesson to be learned from Minamata disease, some experts stress the need to list the names of all those who have been affected by radioactivity from the Fukushima nuclear plant disaster so authorities can track their health for decades to come.

Since its launch in 1996, the Minamata exhibition has drawn around 130,000 visitors to 21 venues nationwide.

Among the displays are pictures of Minamata and its residents, the mercury sludge collected at the bottom of Minamata Bay and 490 portraits of dead victims.

Videotaped testimonies of Minamata disease patients will be aired continuously at the exhibition site, while screenings of films on the issue of Minamata disease and a symposium attended by a Minamata disease patient and journalists will also be held.

The neurological illness, caused by mercury-tainted water dumped into the sea by Chisso, has affected coastal residents in Kumamoto and Kagoshima prefectures. A similar disease was confirmed in Niigata Prefecture later, which was caused by waste water from a Showa Denko K.K. plant.

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