

Nagasaki bomb victim seeks gov't acknowledgement of internal radiation dangers

Sunday 29 July 2012, by [Mainichi Shimbun](#) (Date first published: 28 July 2012).

NAGASAKI — Hirofumi Ogawa was stunned as he watched a hydrogen explosion take place at Fukushima No. 1 Nuclear Power Plant's No. 1 reactor on March 12, the day after the Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami, on television at his home here in Nagasaki. As a former power plant manufacturing company engineer, the 68-year-old easily guessed that the nuclear reactor had spun out of control.

"With the dispersal of radioactive materials (from the explosion), I wouldn't be surprised if this led to the emergence of 'nuclear victims' like us who will harbor worries — like the possibility of developing cancer — with them far into the future," he said.

Ogawa is the lead plaintiff in an ongoing case at the Nagasaki District Court, in which 395 people who were denied government-issued certificates verifying that they are victims of the atomic bomb are demanding that the central and prefectural governments rescind the decision.

The government officially acknowledges a narrow area within a maximum of approximately 12 kilometers north and south of the bomb's hypocenter, and about seven kilometers east and west of the bomb's hypocenter as areas affected by the atomic bomb that was dropped on the city on Aug. 9, 1945. Like in Hiroshima, because of a government-set boundary, Ogawa and the other plaintiffs are not considered "bombing victims" eligible for government support, including a monthly health care stipend. The plaintiffs allege that they have suffered internal exposure to radiation through contaminated well water and agricultural products, leading to health problems like cancer.

When the bomb was dropped on Nagasaki, two-and-a-half year-old Ogawa was about 10.1 kilometers southwest of the bomb's hypocenter, staring out at the ocean while his mother worked nearby on a farm. He says a blue light about two meters long suddenly flashed before his eyes. He was often ill as a child; he developed chronic nephritis in first grade and was held back a grade twice in elementary school. He suffers from health problems to this day.

At the age of 26, Ogawa began working for a plant manufacturing company. He helped build the No. 1 reactor at Hamaoka Nuclear Power Plant in Shizuoka Prefecture, whose shutdown was decided in 2008. He taught himself about nuclear reactors, and from the start, knew firsthand the dangers of radiation. He eventually tried to avoid working on nuclear power plants.

The national government has issued evacuation orders to residents within a 20-kilometer radius of the stricken Fukushima No. 1 Nuclear Power Plant. Meanwhile, it continues make the claim in court that no conclusive data exists on whether internal exposure has affected the health of residents outside the area the government approves as affected by the 1945 bomb in Nagasaki. The plaintiffs in the case, just like those who were exposed to black rain after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, feel that the government is contradicting itself.

“There are differences between an atomic bomb and a nuclear power plant accident, but they’re the same in terms of exposure to radiation,” says Yoshinobu Masuda, 87, a former researcher at the Meteorological Research Institute who conducted radiation surveys in the vicinity of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant. “The radiation-tainted beef problem is like a poster boy for internal exposure. Not everyone who ingests a small amount of contaminated meat will get sick, but the government needs to think about this more seriously.”

It’s been almost four years since Ogawa and the others filed their lawsuit in November 2007, and the plaintiffs are eager to reach a resolution.

“I hope that we win the suit as soon as possible, and can bring the dangers of internal exposure (to the public’s attention),” said Ogawa. “We also want to encourage the people of Fukushima by letting them know that the atomic bomb victims who were exposed to radiation are still alive today.”

Mainichi Shimbun, July 28, 2011

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