

Japan: Elderly 3/11 nuke evacuee deaths spiked – Nursing home ranks' mortality rate up 2.7 times; report cites cold

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The mortality rate of elderly residents of nursing-care facilities in Minamisoma, Fukushima Prefecture, jumped nearly 2.7 times after they evacuated the city in the days following the March 11, 2011, start of the nuclear disaster, due to poor living conditions, a study found.

The study, conducted by University of Tokyo researchers and released Wednesday, found some nursing home residents had to travel more than 300 km after enduring the Tohoku region's biting cold without heat or lunches for about a week. Researchers believe this may have contributed to the rise in the mortality rate.

"Many people who needed distinct and difficult assistance died at evacuation sites," a staff member at a nursing-care facility in Minamisoma said.

The study tracked evacuation records of 328 residents at five elderly nursing homes for about a year after 3/11. The research was led by Shuhei Nomura, a graduate student in global health policy at the university, with support from Kenji Shibuya, professor of health policy, among others.

All 328 residents were evacuated from the city with support from facilities' staff about a week after the Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami, some traveling distances of between 200 km and 300 km in buses, the report said.

Among the 328 elderly residents, 75 had died within about a year of 3/11. When compared with the average mortality rate of the five preceding years, the rate was roughly 2.7 times higher.

At facilities where residents were not provided with lunches for nearly a week because a lunch distributing firm had already halted operations due to the nuclear disaster, the mortality rate soared about three to four times higher than average, Nomura said, adding the elderly couldn't use heaters on air-conditioning units for fear of letting radioactive materials inside and some had to sleep on the floor at evacuation centers.

"It's Tohoku, so it must have been really freezing," Nomura told *The Japan Times*. "I believe they lost their physical strength during that time."

Meanwhile, no statistically significant increase in the mortality rate was found at a facility where residents were able to use heaters and were given three meals a day, the report said. That facility was able to provide a more comfortable environment for its residents because it was preparing its own meals and its heaters were a type that did not take in outside air, Nomura said.

The study was published Wednesday in the U.S. based online science journal *PLOS ONE*.

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P.S.

* Japan Times, March 28, 2013

<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/03/28/national/elderly-311-nuke-evacuee-deaths-spiked/#.UWJGfJUpWE>