

# **Japan: “Symptoms of Minamata disease develop with advancing age. There still must be many potential patients.”**

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## **Minamata resolution still elusive**

The new redress steps for uncertified Minamata disease patients are not likely to lead to a complete settlement of decades-old disputes involving the mercury poisoning disease, panelists at a recent Tokyo symposium indicated.

More than 40,000 people with the disease have applied for the assistance in the last 13 months under a special law stipulating that determining who should receive the benefits take no longer than three years.

But Masazumi Harada, a doctor involved in the Minamata issue during the past half-century, told the audience of around 150 on Saturday: "Symptoms of Minamata disease develop with advancing age. There still must be many potential patients."

His point suggests that the three-year provision could result in those people being abandoned, particularly congenital patients, who were hit by mercury in the womb and who so far have not exhibited symptoms.

The redress, the largest settlement since the government compiled a package in 1995 for uncertified victims, features a lump sum of ¥2.1 million and ¥12,900 to ¥17,700 in monthly medical allowances.

Takeko Kato, who 13 years ago founded a community workshop to support the independence of congenital patients in Minamata, Kumamoto Prefecture, underlined Harada's remarks: "I have seen several congenital patients whose symptoms deteriorated rapidly over a few months and have become confined to wheelchairs.

"They must represent just the tip of the iceberg," she said, indicating there must be an unknown number of such cases among those who were born in Minamata as well as in areas surrounding the Shiranui Sea, and are now in their 40s and 50s.

Minamata disease was caused by Chisso Corp. discharging contaminated wastewater into the sea from its chemical plant in Minamata.

Following official recognition of the disease in Minamata in 1956, a similar disease was later confirmed in Niigata Prefecture, which was caused by wastewater from a Showa Denko K.K. plant.

The symposium was sponsored by the Japan Federation of Bar Associations.

Takahiro Suzuki, a Tokyo-based lawyer working for the federation's committee on pollution, stressed the need to survey the health of people living near the Shiranui Sea.

He said this is necessary to clarify the damage caused by Minamata disease and to determine who should be treated.

It is estimated that 100,000 or 200,000 people were infected with mercury, and there must be many potential patients, according to the federation.

The new redress measures are based on a 2009 special law that expands the scope of victims entitled to government relief measures and allowed Chisso to split into two entities.

One is a holding company responsible for financially compensating the victims, while a subsidiary handles business operations.

Concerns remain that the spinoff, which took place in March, could eventually lead to liquidation of the responsible firm.

## **Kyodo**

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### **Chronology of mercury disease**

May 1956 - Unexplained encephalopathy detected in Minamata, Kumamoto Prefecture.

May 1965 - Second case of Minamata disease confirmed in Niigata Prefecture.

Sept. 1968 - Minamata disease officially designated as a pollution-triggered illness.

March 1973 - The Kumamoto District Court rules in favor of patients in damages suit against Chisso.

Oct. 1995 - Groups of uncertified patients accept government-initiated settlement proposal.

Oct. 2004 - The Supreme Court recognizes the government's responsibility for spreading Minamata disease, eases standards for certifying patients, triggers damages suits filed by uncertified patients.

July 2009 - Relief act enacted for uncertified patients.

April 2010 - The Cabinet adopts redress measures for uncertified

patients, featuring a \2.1 million lump sum coupled with monthly medical allowances.

March 2011 - Chisso spins off its business operations to secure compensation costs.

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**P.S.**

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