

Once 'ideal' Fukushima village begins to drift apart after nuclear disaster

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IITATE, Fukushima — Before the outbreak of the crisis at the Fukushima No. 1 Nuclear Power Plant in March last year, the residents of this village rich in natural resources used to live in harmony.

Now, the Iitate Municipal Government is forging ahead with a decontamination plan, hoping to bring evacuated residents back, but some locals are beginning to push their hopes of returning away and are initiating group relocations to different areas.

As a result, the former harmony of this small mountainous village is starting to be challenged.

Under the municipal government's decontamination plan, all village residents who wish to return to their original homes will be able to do so within about five years. All households in the village are set to be decontaminated within two years, all agricultural fields within five years, and forests within 20 years. The project will cost the village approximately 320 billion yen.

However, while many residents sincerely hope to return eventually, some are beginning to wonder whether returning to the same place is indeed their only option.

In late January, the heads of the village's 20 districts held a meeting in Fukushima city, where Iitate temporarily transferred its office functions following the outbreak of the nuclear disaster. During the meeting, Iitate Mayor Norio Kanno found himself unable to respond to their questions and concerns.

"A decontamination model covering just 50 houses costs 600 million yen. It's pure nonsense," said one. Another resident added: "You're not even sure if radiation doses will decrease. Are you still willing to go ahead with this?"

Kanno, unable to produce a response to either of the comments, merely repeated the phrase: "The only way to find out is to give it a try."

Iitate has a population of approximately 6,000. Residents' village life used to be characterized by a spirit of "madei," a phrase meaning "respect, care and consideration for others" in the local dialect. For many, Iitate used to be "the ideal mountain village."

When the village was designated by the government as an emergency evacuation preparation zone following the outbreak of the nuclear disaster, however, all residents were forced to evacuate from the area.

The municipal government hopes to bring life back to the village through decontamination work. But Hiroshi Kanno, a 63-year-old farmer who evacuated to Fukushima says he feels that the local government, focused too much on preserving the village as it was before the disasters, is in fact ignoring residents' lives.

"I want them to help the residents whose lives have been practically pushed to the limit," he said.

Koji Itonaga, a professor at Nihon University and a longtime Iitate supporter, developed and discussed a potential two-site residency plan for the village with Mayor Kanno. His plan suggests building a “branch” village in a separate location where Iitate residents can live for the next 30 to 50 years with compensation and other financial support from the government and Tokyo Electric Power Co. (TEPCO), until they are able to return to their homes after radiation doses there decrease.

Itonaga points out in his plan that if the government reviews evacuation zones, the village will be further divided. This is why he suggests that residents should move to a separate location en masse.

However, Mayor Kanno has been so far reluctant to accept Itonaga’s plan, on his assumption that “there is no guarantee the central government will help relocate the residents.”

Meanwhile, Iitate residents who are in support of moving to a different location and restarting their lives there have gathered to establish a group called “Shintenchī o Motomeru-kai” (Association seeking new land). Last November they launched a signature-collecting campaign.

Immediately after the group’s campaign began, however, the municipal government banned “all political and similar activities in public village facilities” in a written notice.

Despite the imposed ban, however, the group has already managed to collect some 200 signatures from residents who support mass relocation, hinting that in spite of people’s general wish to return to their homes, many are beginning to look elsewhere for a solution to the current situation.

The Iitate Municipal Government has not surveyed residents on their opinions on relocation or a potential return.

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P.S.

* Mainichi Shimbun, March 11, 2012

<http://mdn.mainichi.jp/mdnnews/national/archive/news/2012/03/11/20120311p2a00m0na003000c.html>