

Japan: Victims of Minamata disease recognition criteria called outrage

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Minamata recognition criteria called outrage

The government must relax its strict criteria for officially recognizing victims of Minamata disease so more people can receive compensation, according to panelists at a symposium on the mercury-poisoning disease.

Recognizing a woman posthumously as a Minamata disease victim in a landmark ruling in April, the Supreme Court called for providing relief to a wider range of sufferers.

But the Environment Ministry, which is in charge of the Minamata issue, has refused to review the 1977 criteria that require a combination of sensory disorders plus other symptoms for someone to be officially recognized as a patient eligible for redress.

At the symposium Saturday in Tokyo, Masanori Hanada, director of and a professor at Kumamoto Gakuen University's Open Research Center for Minamata Studies, said that "the Supreme Court has apparently rejected the recognition criteria, but the Environment Ministry has ignored it. This is an outrage."

"The government's aim must be to disregard sufferers to bring down the curtain on the Minamata issue," he told around 130 people at the symposium sponsored by the Japan Federation of Bar Associations. "But it is now a question of how the government will respond to the Supreme Court's decision and how we, as citizens, push the government to follow it."

Kenji Yamagishi, president of the lawyers association, issued a statement saying the government has disregarded many Minamata victims under its strict recognition criteria and should work to completely resolve the issue.

Another panelist, Tokyo-based lawyer Takahiro Suzuki, said: "The strict criteria result in sufferers being disregarded, not recognized as patients. This is unfair." "It is a denial of Japan's judicial system if the Environment Ministry maintains its irreverence," said Suzuki, who has been involved in pollution-related lawsuits.

Minamata disease, caused by mercury-tainted water dumped by chemical maker Chisso Corp. into the Shiranui Sea, which is surrounded by Minamata in Kumamoto Prefecture and other cities, was officially recognized in 1956.

Since then, only around 3,000 people have officially been recognized as patients under the recognition criteria, including some in Niigata Prefecture where a similar mercury poisoning occurred.

More than 65,000 people have applied for the government's latest redress program for uncertified patients, indicating the scale of the problem. The relief, featuring a one-time payment of ¥2.1 million and monthly medical allowances, is based on a special law on the disease that took effect in 2010.

The government stopped accepting applications last July.

At the symposium, congenital patient Kenji Nagamoto, 53, who was exposed to mercury while in the womb, said: "A sufferer younger than me became unable to walk and is now condemned to a wheelchair. I can walk now, but I'm concerned that I myself may become unable to walk some day. The suffering caused by Minamata disease continues."

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