

Japan: Abe's remarks on mercury poisoning anger Minamata disease sufferers

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KUMAMOTO, Japan (Kyodo) — Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said Wednesday in a video message sent to an international environmental conference in Kumamoto Prefecture that Japan has overcome the damage from mercury poisoning in the 1950s and 1960s, angering those still suffering from the Minamata mercury-poisoning disease.

"As we are the ones who have experienced damage from mercury poisoning and overcome it, Japan has a responsibility to do its best and take the lead in eliminating such damage from mercury in the world," Abe said in his message to the conference's ceremony held in the southwestern Japan city of Minamata in Kumamoto.

The international conference started Monday in Kumamoto with 1,000 participants including ministers from around 140 countries. The participants are expected to adopt the Minamata Convention on Thursday to help prevent mercury poisoning and pollution.

Masami Ogata, 55, a Minamata disease sufferer officially designated by the government, who attended the ceremony, criticized Abe's remarks, saying "Minamata disease is still in the process of being overcome."

Hideki Sato, head of a mutual aid group for victims in the city, said, "I just can't understand why (the prime minister) made such remarks when Minamata disease is far from ending. I want him to be more considerate."

Minamata disease, caused by mercury-tainted water dumped by chemical maker Chisso Corp. in Minamata Bay, was officially recognized as a pollution-caused disease in 1968.

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* <http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20131010p2g00m0dm035000c.html>