

## **A Greeting from Fukushima: Annyeonghaseyo? (Ogenkidesuka?)**

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Thanks to Asia Leadership Fellow Program (ALFP) supported by the International House of Japan and the Japan Foundation, I was able to spend the last two months (from September to October 2016) in Japan, and relished the opportunities to consider the numerous common issues facing Japan, Korea, and Asia from new perspectives. My goal in participating in the program was to ask and try to answer one question, “Are we all really well?”<sup>1</sup> More specifically, I focused on the gap between ordinary people’s perception of safety and wellbeing, on the one hand, and the understanding of security or stability that states and policymakers emphasize.

The nuclear meltdown in Fukushima in March 2011 and the various responses the Japanese society has taken to it ever since formed the fundamental basis of my question. With help from Fujioka Emiko, Secretary General of Fukushima Beacon for Global Citizens Network and a co-fellow in the ALFP program, I was able to visit Fukushima for six days, from October 10 to 15, and gained an invaluable insight into the lives and activities of the victims of the Fukushima incident.

### **Fukushima Nuclear Meltdown and the Japanese Government’s Evacuation Policy**

At least 120,000 people fled their hometowns in Fukushima, whether voluntarily or under the Japanese government’s evacuation order, in the face of the Fukushima meltdown.<sup>2</sup> After the incident, the Japanese government declared all areas within the 20-kilometer radius of the nuclear plants as areas that must be evacuated, while declaring areas outside that radius as requiring “indoor refuge.” Depending on the directions of wind and the surrounding mountains’ features, however, areas showing high levels of radioactive contamination were found even 30 kilometers outside the nuclear plants. Moreover, official forecasts on the spread of radiation were issued belatedly on March 23 for the first time, 12 days after the meltdown, causing great confusion to locals. In consequence, the majority of local residents who chose to take indoor refuge, trusting in the government’s initial announcement, had been exposed to radiation. Examples include residents of the Iitate Village in the Soma District and the Katsurao Village in the Futaba District. It was not until the middle of June that the majority of the villagers were fully evacuated.<sup>3</sup> The Japanese government later raised the

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<sup>1</sup> In general, “How are you?” would be the English equivalent of the phrase *annyeonghaseyo* that Koreans routinely exchange with one another when greeting. The word *annyeong*, written as 安寧 in Chinese, denotes quite a broad array of related concepts, including peace, safety, wellbeing, stability, and tranquility.

<sup>2</sup> “10 Lessons from Fukushima,” (Fukushima Booklet Publication Committee, March 11, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

annual atmospheric radiation exposure ceiling from one millisievert (mSv)<sup>4</sup> to 20 mSv, lifting evacuation orders for areas where the annual radiation exposure amounts to 20 mSv or less as a result of the decontamination work. As a result, almost all villages except for a few within the 20-kilometer radius of the nuclear power plants are to be declared to be relieved of evacuation orders by March 2017. With the evacuation orders lifted, however, the Japanese government will stop providing temporary housing for evacuees. Okuma Town, Namie Town, Tomioka Town, and other areas nearby the nuclear power plants in Fukushima will remain no-return zones for a long time.

### **Decontamination Works**

The Japanese government claims that the capital city of Fukushima Prefecture as well as a significant number of surrounding towns have been decontaminated, with a total budget of over 2 trillion yen having already been spent. Much of the decontamination process involves removing surface soil from the ground. From my visit, however, I could not see clear and perfect ways for removing the contaminated soil, still piled up here and there across downtown Fukushima. Locals argue that some of the plastic bags used in decontamination have already outlived their lifecycles and begun to decompose. The government is nowhere near having started decontamination in the forests, which make up 75% of the contaminated territory. The radiation meters that the prefecture and Japanese government have installed indicated low levels of radiation. But all the meters were installed at least one meter above the ground so that they could not read the amount of radiation on the surface of the earth.

Distrustful of the government's announcements, locals carry their own radiation meters. I had an acquaintance with an activist who specializes in radiation gauging. Yoshino Hiroyuki, who works for a nonprofit organization named SHALOM in the city of Fukushima, rides his bicycle along children-frequented roads and across parks, with a radiation meter of his own design installed on his bicycle. His radiation meter can measure the levels of radiation every one meter his bicycle travels, at 10, 50, and 100 centimeters above ground, and automatically enters the data into Google Map. He and I took the device to the Fukushima train station, which appeared to be the safest. The meter indicated a very low level of radiation, at 0.09 mSv at 100 centimeters above ground, on general roads. At 10 centimeters above the flowerbed just one meter away from one of such roads, however, the meter indicated a high level of radiation, over 1.6 mSv. We were all greatly surprised.

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<sup>4</sup> "The International Commission on Radiological Protection (ICRP) determines the annual dosage limit for the public to be 1 millisievert ("mSv"), a value that most countries have adopted...Exposure to 1 mSv per year means that in one year, on average one ray of radiation passes through the nuclei of every cell in the body." Ibid.

## Organic Food in Fukushima

Locals' lives continue in apparent peace. Sugeno Seiji, an organic farmer, continues with his cultivation practices. He refuses to comply with the government's advice on removing surface soil from rice paddies, and attempts to reduce or eliminate radiation from surface soil by plowing his paddies ever more deeply. To organic farmers like Mr. Sugeno, surface soil is the decisive factor of farming. Nor did Mr. Sugeno trust that the government's way of decontamination was sustainable in the long run. Having persisted in his own way, Mr. Sugeno discovered that the amount of radioactive cesium detected from his rice paddies had reduced drastically. After two years of continuing with his experiment, he discovered that no cesium was detected from husked rice grains. He is currently working with a team of researchers from Niigata University to develop his experiment further.

The prefecture government inspects the entire quantity of rice produced in its jurisdiction for possible radioactive contamination. The threshold level for detection on the prefecture's meter, however, is 12 Becquerel's/kg. The meter fails to detect any levels of radiation below that threshold. The prefecture government regards radiation levels below 100 Becquerel's/kg as safe. When I asked him whether rice produced in Fukushima was consumed in the prefecture, Mr. Sugeno told me that, while adults and seniors eat Fukushima-grown rice, most families feed their children rice from other regions. Rice has become a source of intergenerational divide in families. Organic farmers in Fukushima are aware that organic farming in their region will not be so commercially successful for a long time to come. Some have even committed suicide out of despair.

## Compensation and Punishment, Memory, and the Truth

Aside from suicides, the earthquake/disaster-related deaths in Fukushima far outnumber those of other neighboring regions hit by the tsunami in 2011. The high mortality rate reflects the tiredness of refuge, mental distress, and radioactive effects on health. In the early days of the disaster, the Japanese government and the governor of Fukushima did not guide the public to take potassium iodide (KI) against radioactive iodine-131, which is known to be able to cause thyroid cancer. As a result, the vast majority of locals, except for those of only a few villages, were left helplessly exposed to the cancerous effect of radioactive iodine-131.<sup>5</sup>

Hasegawa Kenichi, a local leader and farmer of 50 milk cows in Iitate Village, claims that he has lost all his cows due to the belated evacuation order from the government. Having been compelled to give up livestock farming, he organized over 3,000 out of 6,000 residents in his village to seek compensation from the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) and the Japanese government. To this end, he and his fellows have resorted to the

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<sup>5</sup> Yuka Hayashi, "Japan Officials Failed to Hand Out Radiation Pills in Quake's Aftermath," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 29, 2011.

Alternative Dispute Resolution Tribunal, which was introduced in the aftermath of the Fukushima disaster upon recommendation from the Japanese Bar Association.

Mutoh Ruiko, who has been active in “the No Nukes Fukushima Network” since before the nuclear meltdown, is filing criminal charge, with signatures from over 14,000 local residents, for the punishment of persons responsible for the disaster. Ms. Mutoh is deeply disappointed in the Japanese government and TEPCO, not only for their failure to provide adequate support for victims, but also for their cover-up of important health information and arbitrary changing of safety standards. She had hoped that the Fukushima incident would transform the Japanese society for better. After hearing the news that the nuclear power plants in Japan would resume operation, however, she decided to do something in order to prevent the recurrence of the same disaster. Yet the Japanese prosecution dismissed all charges by victims against the 33 high-ranking officials and executives of the Japanese government and TEPCO. The Prosecution Review Committee, made up of lottery-winning citizens, however, persevered that at least three of TEPCO’s executives ought to be indicted as criminals. The committee has appointed lawyers to prepare, in the place of prosecutors, for the indictment of the three executives.

### **Fear of Stigmatization**

The heads of some local governments in Japan are not happy with the demand for compensation and punishment. The chief of Iitate Village is a good example. A long-time friend of Mr. Hasegawa, the village chief sent a letter, stating his objection to compensation, to TEPCO. He reasons that monetary compensations would serve as evidence of radiation exposure, and would expose residents of Fukushima to further stigmatization.

The governor of Fukushima is also reluctant to publicize the victimization of his prefecture. He denies the rapid increase in the occurrence of thyroid cancer among children in Fukushima, asserting that the heightened occurrence rate is only a result of the total sampling survey and does not confirm any substantial change in public health.<sup>6</sup> He supports the lifting of the evacuation order, scheduled to take place in March 2017, despite opposition from the majority of constituents. He seems to show that everyone is fine in Fukushima. Of course, their fear of stigmatization does have a point. It is doubtful, though, that their decision without residents’ participation to side with the government and TEPCO, against the will of the majority of people would improve the future prospects of Fukushima.

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<sup>6</sup> According to a study, the thyroid cancer prevalence rate among 300,000 children and youth aged 18 or younger in Fukushima skyrocketed in the four years since October 2011, amounting to 20 to 50 times the average prevalence rate across Japan. See Toshihide Tsuda, et al., “Thyroid Cancer Detection by Ultrasound Among Residents Ages 18 Years and Younger in Fukushima, Japan: 2011 to 2014,” *Epidemiology* 27, no.3 (May 2016): 316–322.

## **Uncompromisable Right to Safer Life and Dignity**

Yoshizawa Masami lives in Namie, the town nearest to the Fukushima nuclear power plants, herding over 300 cows in bold defiance of the government's orders of evacuation and killing cattles. The town is not safe for either humans or animals. Yet, Mr. Yoshizawa continues to run his "Kibo no Bokujo (Ranch of Hope)," saying that rescue is his mission. There are things that matter more to him than personal safety or compensation: the right to live one's livelihood, the right to tend to cattle that cannot be sold off, and the right to control one's life as one wishes—the rights that cannot be substituted with any amounts of compensation.

Takeuchi Toshiyuki and Fujioka Emiko are husband and wife who have chosen to live in Fukushima in order to tell the stories of the city and its residents to the world and to work together with victims. Watanabe Kyoko and innumerable other volunteers continue to live in the region so that they could visit victims in temporary housing to help them with chores, play with children, and chit-chat with seniors. In Fukushima, there are still farmers who continue to cultivate their crops despite the looming uncertainty over their market prospects and the government policy. Over 100,000 evacuees have not yet returned to their hometowns in Fukushima. A fair number of people remaining in the prefecture are separated from their family members. In the face of unfathomable losses and fear, yet these people of Fukushima endure each and every day in diverse ways and manners showing optimism. They all concur on one point though: the nuclear power plants must not be resumed. Thus, the Japanese government's decisions to resume the operation of these plants and to lift evacuation orders early misapply local residents' strength and resilience. The government's attitude of avoiding the problem can cause even more suffering and conflicts to the communities in Fukushima.

## **Controversy over "Restarting" and a New Social Movement**

The Japanese government stopped operation of all the nuclear power plants in the country in the aftermath of the Fukushima nuclear meltdown. However, since announcing its decision to return these plants to operation in 2012, the Japanese government has been restarting the operations of plants that satisfy the new safety standard of the Japan Nuclear Regulation Authority one by one.

Since 2012, restarting the operations of nuclear power plants has been a central source of social and political controversies in Japan. Okuda Aki, a university student who volunteered in Fukushima, felt that something was wrong when he saw the ruling party win a landslide victory in the general elections of late 2012 notwithstanding the Fukushima disaster and massive protests. He suspects that the newly enacted Special Secret Protection Law would further aid and abet the concealment of information about the safety of nuclear energy. Witnessing the Japanese Cabinet's decision regarding the security-related bills in 2014, Mr. Okuda realized what he should do. With his friends, he went on to form an organization

named Students Emergency Action for Liberal Democracy (SEALDs). With only 400 or so members, SEALDs successfully mobilized and organized a massive public protest, with participation from over 100,000 citizens, opposing the security-related bills. The organization went on to play a major role in the birth of a coalition between opposite parties to rein in the unchecked behavior of the ruling party.

According to Professor Oguma Eiji, mass protests gathering 200,000 participants or more have been taking place at least once a year in Japan since 2012. These movements are not organized by traditional organizations. Rather, these protests are led by the “cognitive precariat,” who feel that they are not protected by the state and the established society. This class of people stands upon the ruins of myths, such as “manufacturing-led growth” and “the middle class of all 100 million people in Japan.” The series of these massive protests reflect citizens’ resentment of the political and social elite that fails to read and accept changes at large.

Amid the looming uncertainty over the future of the nuclear industry, the three major nuclear energy companies in Japan, i.e., Hitachi, Toshiba, and Mitsubishi, decided to merge their nuclear fuel businesses together until the spring of 2017 to cope with the plummeting demand. These companies try to offset their losses in Japan by expanding their presence on the nuclear energy markets abroad, particularly in Asia. Electric power companies also threatened the Japanese public that the tariff rates would inevitably go up if nuclear power plants would not resume their operations. Fugimoto Yasunari, leader of the Forum for Peace, Human Rights, and Environment, an anti-nuclear group participating in “the *Sayonara* Nuclear Power Plants Campaign,” responds that the state and the public may pay for the cost of completely shutting down nuclear power plants, but only on the condition that the energy companies first publicly disclose their assets.

### **People’s Priority, Self-determination, and the Future of Asia**

The anti-nuclear movement in Japan has yet to produce tangible political outcomes. During the senate election campaign in 2016, opposition forces formed the first electoral coalition in the history of Japan. Yet the opposition coalition failed to secure the number of seats necessary for constitutional amendment. Professor Oguma’s analysis shows that this failure is not entirely due to the opposition coalition’s incompetency. The unfair electoral system, with its single-member districts and district-centered electoral arrangements, is certainly fault. According to Jokura Kei, Secretary General of the Project for Fair and Equitable Electoral System, this outdated electoral arrangement that fails to reflect the will of the majority in the distribution of seats to different parties continues to obstruct social progress and change as much as the old structure of communication governing the established parties.

The press, likewise, fails to hear the tides in the public opinion. Japan was ranked in the 72nd place, behind South Korea (70th), on the Press Freedom Index of the international

press watch group, Reporters Without Borders (RWB). This is mainly because the Japanese presses censor themselves with respect to the reports on the Abe government.

Nevertheless, changes continue to occur despite the hindering conditions. The gubernatorial election in Kagoshima Prefecture, where the Sendai nuclear power plants are located, in July ended with the victory of an anti-nuclear candidate. The gubernatorial election in Niigata Prefecture in October culminated in a similar result. Thanks to these result, the Japanese government's plan to restart nuclear power plants must be halted. The Japanese civil society has a number of monumental cases in which grassroots democracy at the level of local governments effectively reined in the ambitious national projects of the central government. The progress of grassroots democracy in Japan holds important implications not only for the future safety of Japanese citizens, but also for safety, peace, and democracy across Asia.