

Forgotten on the outskirts of the contaminated “no-man’s-land”

Tens of thousands of people in Fukushima have been waiting for four years to return to their daily lives. Their fears are often dismissed. Some are dying alone.

By [Anna Behrend](#)

They died torn from their familiar settings, forgotten in the anonymity of cramped temporary housing: the Japanese newspaper *Yomiuri Shimbun* has counted around one hundred of these “lonely deaths” ([Iuchi & Maly & Johnson, 2014](#)). They were refugees from the devastating tsunami and nuclear accident in Fukushima. They survived the disaster and were abandoned in the emergency shelters.

The lonely deaths underscore how even four years after the megaquake off the coast of Japan, life still hasn’t returned to normal. Around 230,000 people continue to live in apartments meant as temporary housing, or small fabricated units, tens of thousands of which were constructed following the disaster.

More than half of these people are from Fukushima Prefecture, where even today many areas are still contaminated with radioactive particles from the failed power plant. Of the officially registered displaced persons, only a few are now staying with friends or relatives. The emergency housing was actually only meant to be used for two years. Most of the units are less than 30 square meters, and anything but comfortable.

“Those with contacts or the necessary money move away,” says Ana Mosneaga, researcher at the United Nations University in Shibuya. She is studying the effects of the disaster on people, and has spoken with many of those who have been affected. “It’s the elderly and socially disadvantaged who are remaining in the temporary housing,” she says. Former village communities were pulled apart. It leaves many sick and lonely, torn between wanting to return to the contaminated regions and starting over.

Scrubbing away the radiation

Only a few people have been able to return to their homes so far. The government is trying to make some irradiated areas liveable again. Layers of topsoil are removed, houses are washed with high-pressure cleaners, and in some cases walls are manually scrubbed with brushes. Decontamination has been carried out on residential buildings, parks, playgrounds, schools, streets, fields, and other areas.

The goal is to first reduce aerial radiation levels to less than 20 millisieverts per year, and ultimately to less than one millisievert per year. For comparison's sake, in Germany a person receives roughly two millisieverts per year from natural forms of radiation. An increased risk of cancer is not detected until the annual dose exceeds 100 millisieverts. In fact, the radiation levels in Fukushima have been considerably reduced in many areas due to these activities, but they have their limits.

For one thing, the radioactive particles are not evenly spread across the land. Even in areas that are hardly affected by radiation, there are radioactive hotspots. "If one wanted to be very precise, they would have to actually tell people: this part of your backyard is contaminated and this part isn't – but that's not realistic," says Mosneaga. Instead, large zones are designated with various levels of contamination, which also are used to determine the compensation for residents. As a result, it can occur that houses on one side of the street are decontaminated, but not on the other. One neighbor receives more money in compensation, the other less. This generates resentment.

The decontamination efforts are also limited due to the large swathes of rural areas in the region: small communities are nestled between forested hills. "If we wanted to decontaminate the entire forest, all the trees would have to be cut down, which would lead to landslides and mean another disaster," says Mosneaga. When a residential area is located along a forest, decontamination is only carried out in a 20-meter radius. Some houses, however, are right in the middle of forested valleys. Even if the areas directly surrounding the houses were entirely decontaminated, rain, wind and landslides could still bring new radioactive particles.

The region was split into three zones: areas in which former residents are allowed to move freely but not spend the night. Areas with restricted access during the daytime. And a zone where it will not be possible to return for the foreseeable future (see map).

By mid 2014, decontamination had been completed in four of the municipalities in the green zone. But resettlement has only been allowed in two of these since last year. In total, around 55,000 former residents should be able to return to their homes, but the question is: Will they return at all?

In Kawauchi, a community that was once in the 20-kilometer evacuation zone, only about half of the 3,000 former residents returned – and nearly half of these are 65 or older.

Life surrounded by ghost towns

Many young families with children, in particular, are hesitant to take any risks, and are restarting their lives at a safe distance from the site of the accident. The assurances provided by the government and the plant operator Tepco continue to be met with deeply ingrained distrust. In addition to radiation fears, the lack of infrastructure is also keeping many from returning. “In the past, the residents of Kawauchi would drive to the neighboring cities to shop or visit the hospital,” says the social scientist Ana Mosneaga. But neighboring cities like Futaba or Namie are ghost towns today, since they were more heavily contaminated by radiation than Kawauchi. Who would want to live here?

Only 10-20 percent of the displaced persons even want to return according to a survey conducted in late 2014 by the Reconstruction Agency. “These types of surveys are being regularly conducted,” says the social scientist Mosneaga, “and every year more and more people respond that they are not sure whether they want to return.”

So do the government’s colossal decontamination plans even make sense? Wouldn’t it make more sense to invest the estimated USD 20.5 billion in constructing new cities? “It can’t be put in such black-and-white terms,” says

Ana Mosneaga, “some people think these measures are window dressing, but others consider it the only chance of ever returning.”

In the city of Namie, the citizens asked for advice from those who will have to deal with the situation for a long time to come. They asked schoolchildren under the age of 16 how they would like their hometowns to be in the future. The result: the children didn’t want a modern city, they just wanted the city to be the same way it was before the accident.

“There is no silver bullet for dealing with the situation,” says the researcher Ana Mosneaga. The important thing is for the former residents to be included in decision-making, for there to be cooperation across all governmental levels on realistic plans, and for other prospects than returning home to be opened up.

No way back to the old life

Some municipalities will never return to the way they were before the disaster, because they were entirely dependent on the nuclear power plant as a source of employment. In other municipalities like Futaba and Okuma, temporary storage sites are planned for approximately 28 million cubic meters of radioactive waste – a giant landfill for the next 30 years. “Daily life, as it used to be, has been lost forever in some communities,” says Mosneaga.

“Across most of Japan, life has continued as if nothing happened,” says Mosneaga, “right after the disaster, everyone talked about wanting to help the affected region. But that has dropped off.” Soon the government wants to restart the first of the 48 idle reactors. Last weekend, thousands of people protested against the government’s plans, but in many places there is a sense of resignation. “*Shikata ga nai*” – “It can’t be changed” goes the Japanese saying.