

Blood Money - Fukushima Victims Bitter Over Compensation

涙金—補償額を不服とする福島の犠牲者たち

David McNeill

Between 2012 and 2014 we posted a number of articles on contemporary affairs without giving them volume and issue numbers or dates. Often the date can be determined from internal evidence in the article, but sometimes not. We have decided retrospectively to list all of them as Volume 10, Issue 54 with a date of 2012 with the understanding that all were published between 2012 and 2014.

By David McNeill

In autumn last year, Shoji Katsuzo (75) was quietly farming rice, vegetables and a small herd of cattle in the picturesque village of Iitate. Today, he lives in a two-room temporary house 35 kilometers away with his wife Fumi (73). His herd has been slaughtered, his farm abandoned to weeds. He is unlikely to ever earn a working income again, let alone return alive to the home that has been in his family since the 1880s.

Mr. Shoji's story is just one of at least 80,000 from the irradiated prefecture of Fukushima, home to the disabled Daiichi nuclear power plant, which has been leaking radiation since the March 11 earthquake and tsunami knocked out its cooling system. Most of those people hastily evacuated from the immediate 20-km vicinity of the crippled nuclear plant and heavily irradiated towns and villages such as Iitate outside the zone, leaving behind all they

had.

How is plant operator Tokyo Electric Power Co. to adequately compensate the victims of the planet's worst nuclear disaster in 25 years? The government estimated this month that Tepco's final compensation bill could top 4 trillion yen - over \$52 billion. Many observers believe that's a gross underestimate of what is required: Who is to pay for the cost of decommissioning the Fukushima plant, for example, or cleaning up irradiated land that the government said could stretch to an area larger than the size of greater Tokyo?

For families like Mr. Shoji's, such questions are very real. Since the disaster began, they have been given a grand total of just one million yen (\$13,000) from Tepco, and another 300,000 yen (\$4,000) for each family member in moving fees. He's applying for four million yen in final compensation for his farm but expects to get only half that. Standing in the way of even that modest sum is a 60-page compensation claim form accompanied by an explanation booklet 160 pages long. "We've spent days toiling over it and still have no idea what to do," he says.

So complicated is the application process that a reported 3000 people have been calling a Tepco hotline every day to ask questions or complain since the documents were sent out on Sept. 12. Many victims suspect that the utility is making it deliberately difficult to deter all

but the most dedicated, a charge it denies. The company says it is responding to those complaints by boosting the team of officials who explain the compensation process from 280 to 900.

Most analysts believe Tepco has no chance of footing the entire compensation bill without going bankrupt. In the summer, it announced plans to sell off properties and other assets to raise over 600 billion yen. It has so far paid out about 160 billion yen to households, businesses, fishermen and farmers like Mr. Shoji. But that amount is a drop in the bucket compared to the final cost of putting him and thousands of others back on their feet.

Thousands of farmers are out of work. Hundreds of fishermen around the Fukushima coast have been banned from taking their boats out to sea because of the fear of contaminated fish. A few go out trawling for debris washed out by the March 11 tsunami, a job that earns them roughly \$153 a day from the government. Some like Ichida Yoshio hope that if they do enough to clean up the sea, they will be able to fish again.

Those who have managed to wade through Tepco's application have found plenty to make them upset. Tepco wants the claimants to attach screeds of evidence about properties and assets, data, which many lost in the earthquake and tsunami that destroyed their homes. A clause demands that victims waive the right to reject the size of the eventual compensation package once they sign off on the document. Following protests, the company has promised "flexibility" in dealing with claims but no cut in the length of the compensation forms.

The government's Ministry of Economy Edano Yukio, who was chief spokesman through the worst of the Fukushima disaster, waded into the controversy this month. "I am a lawyer, but even as a lawyer, the content is difficult to read through immediately," he told the Diet, adding that he found it "natural" that the Fukushima victims were upset about the compensation process.

Mr. Shoji and his wife read about all this in the newspapers in their prefab bungalow, when they're not whiling away the days wondering about what will happen to them. "We're the victims and Tepco is the perpetrator, but I get no sense at all of the company being guilty," he says. "If I think about it, it makes me very sad, so I just try to focus on the future."

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Other articles on Fukushima by David McNeill:

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