

Fukushima and Okinawa - the “Abandoned People,” and Civic Empowerment 福島と沖縄—「棄民」、および市民の力

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On March 11, 2011, an earthquake and tsunami along the Pacific coastline of Northeastern Japan brought devastation reminiscent of the 1945 atomic and incendiary bombing that devastated whole towns, littering them with the bodies of victims and posing a continuing threat to survivors. After Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the nuclear reactor meltdown and explosion at four reactors at Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant was the third large-scale nuclear disaster to hit Japan. This time, however, Japan inflicted it on itself.

Two weeks after the disaster, author Oe Kenzaburo wrote,

The Japanese should not be thinking of nuclear energy in terms of industrial productivity . . . To repeat the error by exhibiting, through the construction of nuclear reactors, the same disrespect for human life is the worst possible betrayal of the memory of Hiroshima’s victims.¹

The New Yorker, which published Oe’s essay, was the magazine that in 1946 published John Hersey’s *Hiroshima*,² where, for the first time through the narratives of bomb victims, American readers were confronted with the

human consequences of the events that had unfolded under the mushroom cloud. Now Japan, the “pacifist nation sheltering under the American nuclear umbrella,” as Oe puts it, had allowed itself to buy into the illusion of a dichotomy between nuclear weapons and nuclear power, the former evil and the latter peaceful.

Anti-nuclear sentiment had grown rapidly in post-1945 Japan, especially after the crew of the Japanese fishing boat Lucky Dragon #5 was subjected to radiation from a US hydrogen bomb test at Bikini Atoll in 1954,³ touching off Japan’s powerful anti-nuclear weapons movement. But that sentiment would be largely eclipsed by the Eisenhower administration’s “atoms for peace program” leading Japan to invest heavily in nuclear power. In 2011, Japan would pay a heavy price for ignoring the risks, and building fifty-four nuclear power plants around the coastline of its earthquake- and tsunami-prone islands.⁴ The two forms of the nuclear were in fact comparable in their potential to inflict devastation.

In the immediate aftermath of the March 11 Level 7 earthquake tsunami disaster, the troubled power plants at Fukushima Daiichi released radioactive material that was 15 per cent of that released at Chernobyl (770,000 tera-becquerels), and radioactive fallout of Cesium 137 (half-life 30 years) that is 168.5 times that released by the Hiroshima atomic-bomb.⁵ Some 600 square kilometres of land (an area ten times that of Manhattan) has Cesium deposit levels equivalent to the uninhabitable land around Chernobyl even 25 years after the accident. There is an additional 700 square

kilometres of land with radiation levels that made evacuation mandatory after Chernobyl,⁶ yet tens of thousands of people, including radiation-susceptible children and pregnant women, remain in the area. What particularly distinguishes Fukushima from Chernobyl is the large amount of radioactive material (3,500 tera-becquerels⁷) released into the ocean, levels unprecedented among all past nuclear attacks, accidents and tests, raising concern about the effect on marine life and seafood. Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) and the Japanese government, in explaining the failure to prevent such a disaster insist that the scale of the tsunami was “beyond the scope of the imaginable.” Mounting historical evidence points to the contrary, however: a tsunami of Fukushima scale was indeed to be expected, but government and TEPCO chose to ignore it.⁸

Much of the above contamination was unavoidable even after the nuclear meltdown occurred, but the government’s attempts to minimize liability and to prioritize economy over people, supported by industry, exposed people to further, avoidable contamination.⁹ Sato Eisaku, former Fukushima Governor (1988-2006) reflects on what happened to people who trusted their Government:

People of Namie Town stayed up all night, looking for missing people, but evacuation was ordered, so they went to Tsushima District [to the Northwest]. For three days from then, 6,000 people, one third of the town’s population, drank water, and ate food served there. When we looked at the contamination map released by the government much later, Tsushima was painted blazing red, indicating the highest contamination level. The [Namie]

mayor had tears in his eyes as he told me the story.¹⁰

The mainstream media, for which the electric power companies are major sponsors, have cooperated with the government in downplaying radiation risks, even promoting produce from radiation-affected regions in the name of “supporting tsunami-hit areas.” The government has raised allowable radiation exposure levels for ordinary people by twenty times (1 to 20 millisieverts per year), and for nuclear workers by two and half times (from 100 to 250 millisieverts in 5 years), it has set “provisional” [i.e. relaxed] standards for food and drinking water contamination, and labelled any food with radioactive material under those standards “safe.” Voices raised to question the safety of products from affected areas were dismissed as “harmful rumours” (*fuhyo higai*).

Okinawan historian Tonaki Morita saw such policies as indicative of the government’s readiness in case of emergencies to “give up protecting people, mobilizing people for national interest, and making people accept death”, much as the Japanese government did to Okinawa during WWII by sacrificing the islands and their people, then by accepting Okinawa’s status as a US military colony between 1945 and 1972, and finally by imposition of military bases after the war and to this day. They promote such consciousness by evoking nationalism and glorifying the sacrifice of nuclear workers just as they once they glorified Kamikaze pilots.¹¹

The media extensively covered the US military’s “Operation Tomodachi,” presenting the US as a savior in the wake of the 3.11 disaster while ignoring the US role in promoting nuclear power over the last half century and ignoring the fact that the cost of the operation was only approximately one percent of the expenses that the Japanese government annually bears for US troops in Japan.¹²



Operation Tomodachi

Japan, having spread massive contamination through air and the sea throughout the world, portrayed itself in the international community as a victim of prejudice toward Japanese products, and pleaded for the purchase of Japanese food and products. They reported planning to meet goals early, such as declaring “cold shutdown” of the troubled reactors, even when they did not even know where the fuel was after it melted down and through the containment vessels.¹³ The government, moreover, sought to return evacuees as quickly as possible to areas still highly contaminated and with little prospect of successful decontamination. Radioactive Cesium has been found in urine samples of children not just in directly affected areas of the Northeast, but in Tokyo and other locations more than two hundred kilometres from the reactors,¹⁴ and abnormalities have been observed in thyroids of children in Fukushima.¹⁵

If the government’s job is to protect people and the environment, it was necessary to evacuate everyone who was at high risk, above all the most vulnerable—infants, children and pregnant women—and to contain radiation to the extent possible. What the government did was exactly the opposite: leaving far too many people in risk-affected areas, and spreading

contamination throughout and beyond Japan through food, sludge, rubble, garden soil, and landfill. Okinawan author Urashima Etsuko, reflecting on the aftermath of 3.11, lamented,

What kind of world have we created? Water, air, and soil, nurturers of life, now have become a threat to life. It makes me shiver, thinking about the crime we have committed against future children.¹⁶

The people of Fukushima and the people of Okinawa may both be described, as Okinawan peace activist and writer Nishioka Nobuyuki does describe them, as *kimin*, or “abandoned people.” Nuclear power plants in poverty stricken rural areas and US military bases concentrated in Okinawa are both rooted in the discriminatory policies of the national government. Each discriminates against the periphery to assure the protection of the state and guarantee the energy needs of the metropolis. In the backdrop of the fifty-seven year long Japanese nuclear power policy is the corrupt structure of “politics, bureaucracy, industry, labour organizations, academia, and media,” what critics have labeled the “nuclear village.”¹⁷ The central government targets vulnerable rural municipalities, already suffering from depopulation and economic degradation, to accept nuclear reactors or military bases, flashing subsidies, “white-elephant” projects, and jobs. But neither US bases nor nuclear reactors brought prosperity. Former (1998-2006) Fukushima Governor Sato Eisaku says,

From now on, I want to think of Okinawa’s hardship as if it were my own.... Subsidies associated with hosting nuclear reactors were never the “candy” they were thought to be. One town which invited a nuclear power plant suffered from financial difficulties even in the absence of accidents, and after 30 years, the

town cannot even pay the mayor's salary....We need to think from the perspective of future generations, and learn from the hardship that Okinawa has gone through.¹⁸

This realization is shared by Inamine Susumu, Mayor of Nago City.

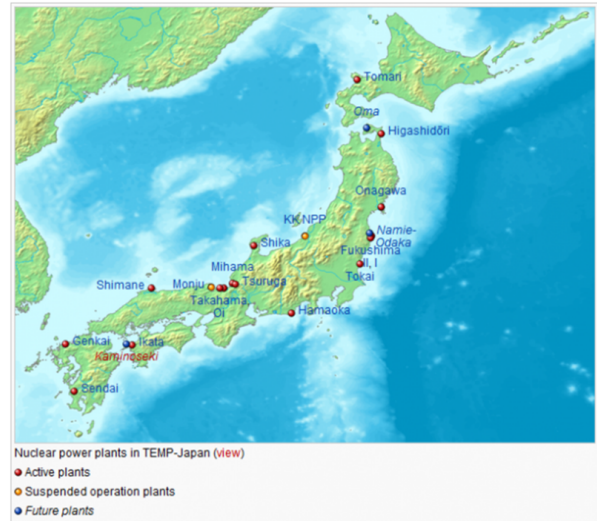
....[Half of the subsidy] funds just went for accelerated public works projects and you can hardly claim that these projects benefited the northern-district municipalities with weak financial capability.¹⁹

Subsidy funds, which are not "earned by the sweat of the people," never cover 100% of the cost of the public projects; local municipalities are left to bear part of the expenses, and above all they find themselves saddled with post-construction maintenance, which in the long term becomes a financial burden for small municipalities, which have little need for so many community centres and sports stadiums. Since Mayor Inamine's refusal to host a new base, Nago City no longer receives the "realignment subsidy," which is granted to base-hosting municipalities, despite the fact that Nago continues to host the Henoko base. Inamine, with local support, remains committed to creating a city that does not rely on subsidies or the US military.²⁰

Nor is the problem limited exclusively to Okinawa. For fiscal year 2012, four out of the forty-four nuclear-hosting municipalities in Japan have declined subsidy funds. Sakurai Nobukatsu, mayor of Minamisoma City (about 25 kilometres from Fukushima Daiichi), said,

We have stated that we will no longer co-exist with nuclear power plants, and we have written the phrase "departure from nuclear power" in our reconstruction plan.

None of the problems [that we now face] can possibly be solved with the level of subsidies we receive.²¹



Nuclear power plants in Japan's peripheries, March 2011

As in the case of Okinawa, the response to the 3.11 crisis has been to pit Tokyo against local governments and citizens. On October 20, 2011, the Fukushima Prefectural Assembly adopted a resolution calling on the government to close all ten nuclear reactors in the prefecture. It became the first of the thirteen prefectures hosting nuclear power facilities to do so.²² While the central government is eager to maintain its current pro-nuclear power policy by "ensuring the highest standard of safety," and even plans to export nuclear power technology,²³ polls indicate that over 80 per cent of Japanese now favor nuclear phase-out²⁴ and 66 per cent of prefectural and municipal leaders oppose construction of new nuclear reactors.²⁵ Okinawa, the prefecture farthest away from Fukushima Daiichi, has no nuclear power plant. However, the Okinawan power company has been conducting research on introducing small- to mid-size nuclear

reactors. On September 25, *Ryukyu shimpo*, one of the two main Okinawan newspapers, called attention to a 1980's plan to build a high-level radioactive waste disposal site in one of the prefecture's remote islands.²⁶

Will people of the periphery choose to remain abandoned? Certainly not all. In Northeastern Japan, many people have stood up, taking safety into their own hands. Citizen groups conduct independent radiation measurements and publish their own radiation protection guides. Anti-nuclear power demonstrations spread, with a scale and intensity not seen in mainland Japan since the 1960s anti-Anpo (Japan-US Security Treaty) movement. As seen in Sato Eisaku's words quoted above, perceptions of commonality between Okinawa and Fukushima – the state imposition of military bases or nuclear reactors on the basis of discrimination against marginal and vulnerable areas at the expense of well-being of those living there – seems to be growing in Japan, awakening some with sympathy with the Okinawan situation on a level not seen before 3.11.

Though the scale of current anti-nuclear demonstrations in Japan are not comparable to those of anti-base movements in Okinawa for the past six decades that mobilize as much as ten per cent of the population, it is notable that some mainlanders seem to emulate the Okinawan movement, using the same symbolic colour yellow, and slogans like “life is precious” (*Nuchi du Takara* in Okinawan). As in the “Arab's Spring” movements of 2011, civic voices spread through newly emerging social media such as Facebook and Twitter, integrating existing movements, connecting different generations, and merging anti-nuclear, anti-base, anti-neoliberal and the burgeoning “Occupy” movements, suggesting a broader possible social base for movements throughout Japan.

Because of increasing public distrust in the

government and mainstream media's information concerning the crippled nuclear reactors and radiation risks, internet media have attracted a surge of new users in post-3.11 Japan. There is an emerging crop of internet journalists, such as Iwakami Yasumi, Uesugi Takashi, Kinoshita Kota, and Shiraishi Hajime, and many others, as well as widely read bloggers and Twitterers²⁹ Their influence threatens the monopoly on information of the Japanese government and major media, leading the government to call on telecommunication companies to “take appropriate measures to prevent groundless rumours on the internet,”³⁰ giving rise to plans to monitor “inaccurate and inappropriate information” on blogs and Twitter,³¹ and inviting influential overseas bloggers to Japan in order to get them to promote Japan as a safe place to travel to and buy from.³² These manipulative plans were met with much contempt and scorn on the internet, where they were derided as desperate propaganda by the government.

With Okinawa's all-island determination to refuse construction of another military base on their land in the face of unremitting pressure from the Japanese and US governments, and with people across the nation awakening to new dimensions of citizenry and autonomy through alternative media and direct action, are we living in “a global Gandhian moment,”³³ as international law scholar Richard Falk suggests, in which the “abandoned people” are empowered and engaged in non-violent confrontations with established powers, making the impossible possible?

An answer is in each of us, and how we capture this critical historical moment.

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Articles on related subjects:

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- Nicola Liscutin, [Indignez-Vous! ‘Fukushima,’ New Media and Anti-Nuclear Activism in Japan](#)
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- Paul Jobin, [Dying for TEPCO? Fukushima’s Nuclear Contract Workers](#)
- Say-Peace Project and Norimatsu Satoko, [Protecting Children Against Radiation: Japanese Citizens Take Radiation Protection into Their Own Hands](#)

Notes

¹ Oe Kenzaburo, “History Repeats,” *The New Yorker*, March 28, 2011.

² John Hersey, *Hiroshima*, Vintage, 1989

³ Yuki Tanaka and Peter Kuznick, “Japan, the Atomic Bomb, and the “Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Power,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, Vol. 9, Issue 18 No. 1, May 2, 2011

⁴ Gavan McCormack, Hubris Punished: Japan As a Nuclear State, *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* Vol. 9, Issue 16 No 3, April 18, 2011.

⁵ “Fukushima accident released far more cesium than Hiroshima bombing,” *Asahi shimbun*, 28 August 2011. Fukushima nuclear

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⁷ “Radioactive cesium from Fukushima on tour of Pacific Ocean,” *The Daily Telegraph*, 15 Sep 2011.

⁸ “TEPCO failed to act on 10% probability assessment for worst-case tsunami,” *Mainichi shimbun*, 10 Oct 2011.

⁹ [Say-Peace Project and Satoko Norimatsu](#), “Protecting Children Against Radiation: Japanese Citizens Take Radiation Protection into Their Own Hands,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, Volume 9, Issue 25, No.1, June 20, 2011.

¹⁰ Sato Eisaku, “Nihon wa ima kanshi kokka,” *Ryukyu shimpo*, 25 Sep 2011.

¹¹ Tonaki Morita, “3/11 igo ni kansuru kosatsu,” Ishihara Masaie Ed., *Peace Now Okinawasen musen no tameno saiteii*, Horitsu Bunkasha, 2011., pp. 132-133.

¹² Roxana Tiron, “U.S. Defense Department Will Spend as Much as 80 Million on Aid to Japan,” *Bloomberg*, 29 Mar 2011. “So-called ‘Sympathy Budget’ is only 28% of the total expenses Japan is paying for US bases,” *Peace Philosophy Centre*, 2 Oct 2010, [link](#).

¹³ “Criteria for ‘cold shutdown’ of Fukushima nuclear plant remain vague and ambiguous,” *Mainichi shimbun*, 18 Oct 2011.

¹⁴ For example, “Saitama ken kawaguchi shi 10 sai no onna no ko no nyo kara seshiumu kenshutu,” *Kodomo o mamoro Save Child*, [link](#).

¹⁵ “Kojosen no kino 10 nin ga henka fukushima no kodomo shinshu dai byoin chosa,” *Sankei shimbun*, 4 October 2011, [link](#).

¹⁶ “Taiki chu to kaisui no hoshasen ni tsuiten futatsu no gimon,” *Peace Philosophy Centre*, April 4, 2011, [link](#).

¹⁷ Nishioka Nobuyuki, “genshiryoku ‘kaku’ no nai musen shakai o,” Ishihara Masaie Ed., *Peace Now Okinawasen musen no tameno saiteii*, Horitsu Bunkasha, 2011, p. 179.

¹⁸ Sato, *ibid*.

¹⁹ [Inamine Susumu and Miyagi Yasuhiro](#), “‘Unacceptable and Unendurable,’ Local Okinawa Mayor Says NO to US Marine Base Plan,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, Vol 9. Issue 42 No 2, October 17, 2011.

²⁰ “Saihen kofukin keijou sezu 11nendo yosan nago shi ga hoshin,” *Ryukyu shimpo*, 12 Decemer 2010, [link](#).

²¹ Sakurai Nobukatsu interviewed in *NHK News* 7, 19 October 2011.

²² “Zen genpatsu ‘hairo’ no seigan saitaku fukushima ken gikai, ricchi do ken de hatsu,” *Tokyo shimbun*, 20 Oct 2011.

²³ “Genpatsu yushutsu o keizoku,” *Ryukyu shimpo*, 19 Oct 2011.

²⁴ “Majority of Japanese want to scrap nuclear

plants: poll,” The China Post (AFP), 19 Jun 2011, [link](#).

²⁵ “Genpatsu shin zosetsu hantai 66%,” *Ryukyu shimpo*, 11 Sep 2011.

²⁶ “Yaeyama de hoshasei haikibutsu shobunjo mosaku nihon gennen komon ga chosa,” *Ryukyu shimpo*, 25 September 2011, [link](#).

²⁷ [Say-Peace Project and Satoko Norimatsu](#), “Protecting Children Against Radiation: Japanese Citizens Take Radiation Protection into Own Hands,” The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus, 20 June 2011.

²⁸ [Hase Michiko](#), “We want genpatsu in Tokyo!” – The new sarcastic edge of Japan’s anti-nuclear demos,” The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus, 11 Oct 2011.

²⁹ See Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus complete coverage and guide sources on the 3.11 earthquake, tsunami and nuclear plant meltdown, [link](#).

³⁰ “Somusho ni yoru ‘intanetto jo no ryugen higo’ o torishimaru yosei ni tsuite,” *Peace Philosophy Centre*, [link](#).

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³³ [Richard Falk](#), “Is This a Global Gandhian Moment?”, *Citizen Pilgrimage* (Richard Falk’s blog), 10 Oct 2011.