Back from the Brink Back

Apr. 07, 2011:

By David McNeill -- April 7, 2011

Like most Japanese men, Katsunobu Sakurai read apocalyptic comic book stories about the future when he was a boy. He never expected to live through one of those stories himself.

A common plot sees a modern city reduced overnight to a ghostly husk as fears of nuclear contamination empties it of people. Businesses shut and food, water and petrol run out. Old people left behind begin dying. The city mayor makes a desperate televised appeal for help. Such is real life in Sakurai's city of Minami-Soma.

Over 71,000 people lived here before March 11. Today there are fewer than 10,000. About 1,470 are dead or missing, the remainder are scattered throughout Japan in over 300 different locations, "as far as we can tell," adds Sakurai, who took over as mayor in January. Dangling from his neck are two radiation counters, a reminder that the nightmare that descended on his city last month has yet to end.

Mayor Sakurai briefly became one of the most famous faces of Japan's disaster when he posted an 11-minute video on YouTube pleading for help. The March 11 quake and tsunami had pulverised the city's coast, but it was its proximity to the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Plant 25 km away that transformed the city's predicament into an existential crisis.

As a series of explosions ripped through the plant, the government told its citizens to stay indoors to avoid radiation. Journalists fled, deliveries stopped coming and the locals were left to fend for themselves. "Everyone who could leave left. We were not getting food or fuel. Life was unbearable," recalls Sakurai.

Exhausted, he sat in front of a digital camcorder in his office and recorded one of the most haunting dispatches from the disaster zone, reaching outside Japan's borders and rounding on Tokyo and the plant operator Tokyo Electric Power Co (Tepco) for abandoning Minami-Soma. "With the scarce information we can gather from the government or Tepco, we are left isolated. I beg you to help us," he said.

The video scored over 200,000 hits and sparked a worldwide relief effort that continues to send aid and help flooding into Sakurai's office. But he remains angry at how his citizens were treated. "The video put pressure on the government. But there was not a single phone call from Tepco for 22 days," he says, still wearing the same grey boiler suit he wore in the YouTube video. "They gave us no information at all."

Today, Tepco official Issei Takaki is permanently seconded to the Minami-Soma city office. His job is to report on the frantic daily fight inside the Fukushima plant to stop radiation leaking from its damaged reactors. "We have a seven-AM meeting with the mayor every day where I report the reactor temperatures, pressure, contamination levels and anything else he wants to know," explains Takaki.

One of the hundreds of workers at the nuclear facility when the March 11 quake/tsunami struck, he spent 10 days locked down inside during the worst of the crisis, when he often thought he was going to die. But the last few days in this town have been almost as difficult. "People are angry" he accepts. "They stop me to say they want the plant fixed so they can return to their old lives."

In the last week, some of Minami-Soma's citizens have begun drifting back, while warily watching the wounded plant up the coast. Supermarkets, restaurants and most of the bigger companies remain shut, but some of the smaller shops in the city are reopening. "I left my daughter in Tokyo to come back to work," explains Mayumi Hayashi, who serves customers in a half-empty Seven-Eleven convenience store about a kilometer from the city office. "I told her to stay there until the end of the month, at least until we see if the plant is safe."

Few profess much faith in Tepco, which has dumped almost 8,000 tons of toxic water into the local seas since Monday. Another 60,0000 tons is on site. Tepco admitted yesterday that the level of highly radioactive water inside concrete tunnels in the No. 2 reactor is rising. Engineers are trying to prevent a buildup of hydrogen inside reactor 1, the prelude to another possible explosion. Nobody believes the crisis is over.

"The radiation doesn't seem so dangerous now but who knows what will happen?" frets Rikio Watanabe, a truck driver who returned from an evacuation center this week to his home on the city outskirts. The plant is never far from their minds, he says, recalling how they felt the ground tremble when the explosions began there three weeks ago. His wife Miyoko can no longer work at a local food cooperative since sales of mildly radioactive potatoes, cabbages and other vegetables have been banned. "Life is difficult but it's better to be at home," she says.

Mayor Sakurai frets that the plant will hobble, perhaps destroy the town's return from the brink. The government has just announced it may expand the evacuation zone around the plant, emptying Minami-Soma of its last 10,000 citizens.

As he speaks, the tap-tap of a house being repaired drifts in from outside. Life is returning to the city center. But many people are keeping their children far away. He has heard reports that some are being bullied because of fears about contamination. His parents are among the evacuees.

"The radiation here is low," he insists, showing one of his counters, which reads 0.9 microsieverts. The second shows he has accumulated 16 microsieverts in four days. At its worst, he says, it was about 10 microsieverts an hour. "It's worse outside the 30km zone. "Radiation doesn't travel in neat circles."

He says he has never despaired. "On the surface, we're starting to move forward and radiation is falling slowly but by far the biggest problem is the Fukushima reactors. I think the accident shows we have to stop building nuclear plants. The radiation doesn't stop in Japan, it goes all around the world."

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