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English edition:
 TEL 438-797-2426
 montrealbulletin@bellnet.ca

Japanese edition:
 TEL 438-797-2426
 montrealbulletin@bellnet.ca

Advertisements:
 montrealbulletinads@gmail.com

Fukushima: Seven Years Later

By Mariko Nishi



Photo: Shimshu Hida

Three years later, two mourners pray in front of their family grave in protective gowns (March 27, 2014, Okuma-cho)

Editor's Note: Mariko Nishi is a translator and interpreter in Montreal. She is a supporter of Montreal Kizuna, a grassroots organization whose purpose is to support the people, especially children, affected by The Great East Japan Earthquake of March 11, 2011 and subsequent disaster at the Fukushima Dai-ichi Nuclear Power Plant. The views expressed in this article are her own.

Many strange things have been going on in Japan since the magnitude nine earthquake and tsunami on March 11, 2011 that flooded the backup power system that was supposed to keep cooling the fuel rods and eventually caused the three reactors of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant to melt down. The government handled this disaster by understating and even lying about the damage, violating people's basic human rights and denying their access to health and safety.

Most of us don't think about it anymore — just what the victims had feared. I also would have completely forgotten about Fukushima by now, had it not been for the daily Facebook posts of several Fukushima activists and independent journalists that I follow. Unfortunately, there are no real "updates" anymore because nothing has changed — in fact, it's getting worse. I would like to point out a couple of ongoing issues — and they represent only the tip of the iceberg.

The Futile Clean Up Effort

Tens of millions of flexible container bags of soil (each one cubic metre in size) are piled into black pyramids in more than 1000 temporary storage sites — often outside people's homes and schools in Fukushima. A video taken by a drone captured the enormity of the contaminated soil conundrum (<https://tinyurl.com/fuku-soil>). From Jan 2012 to March 2017, this "decontamination project" cost 2.6 trillion yen or about \$26 billion USD (100JPY=1USD) and employed 30 million workers across eight prefectures, according to the Ministry of the Environment (MoE)¹.

Although this effort might lower radiation

levels temporarily, those levels rebound when wind or rain carry the radioactive substances back. Rainwater seeps in and out of the deteriorating bags and new plants are growing straight through the material. It appears that decontamination done this way does not work. The only result of the 26 billion-dollar project is an estimated 22 million cubic metres of decontamination soil in "temporary" storage sites across Fukushima², which the MoE promised to move to "Interim Storage Facilities" so that the "temporary" sites can be cleared and "restored" by the magic year³ of 2020⁴. However, bags in the Interim Storage Facilities must ultimately be moved again and disposed of outside of Fukushima prefecture within thirty years². This led to the next brilliant idea.

Redistribution of 22 million cubic metres of collected contaminated topsoil nation-wide in public construction projects and horticulture

The government decided to skip the whole "Interim Storage Facility" phase and instead, recycle the decontamination soil measuring less than 8000 becquerels/kg into public construction

continued on page 3



Piles of bags of radiation-contaminated soil, awaiting disposal (January 3, 2016, Tomioka-cho)

projects⁵ and soil less than 5000 bec/kg into horticulture land across Japan⁶. The MoE now claims that soil with radioactive levels up to 80 times what was previously allowed is now harmless enough to be spread around Japan with “careful management.” Essentially, they are abandoning the 2.6 trillion yen project although it may cost just as much to truck all of the soil across Japan. This approach would then affect 125 million Japanese instead of the two million residents affected by the initial Fukushima disaster. Using my lay person logic, it seems that even simple rain can leach out the contaminants since water is connected underground and it also brings into question the MoE’s assertion that radioactive substances can be sealed safely just by placing some non-contaminated soil and asphalt on top. Even if it’s proven somewhat safe, it’s a shame that they couldn’t have spent the 26 billion dollars on something that would have helped the affected residents directly.

Denying the relationship between thyroid cancer in children and radiation and not disclosing an accurate number of cases

Many “experts” are still arguing that the high rates of thyroid cancer in Fukushima are due to the “screening effect,” i.e., that small cancers that would normally go unnoticed are now being detected excessively through rigorous screening. This phenomenon was observed in other countries such as Canada⁷ and Korea, where the incidence of thyroid cancer increased by 6.4-fold over ten years when a new diagnostic technique known as fine needle aspiration cytology (FNAC), was first introduced⁸. Dr. Shinichi Suzuki of Fukushima Medical University is of this camp, stating that “the increase of thyroid cancers in Fukushima seems to be due to a mass screening effect by the large-scale and highly sophisticated ultrasound examination ... not associated with the

Photo: Shimshu Hida

Fukushima nuclear accident.” However at the same 2016 symposium he reported that 77.6% of the 125 individuals operated in his hospital had lymph node metastasis, 65.6% of the 125 had tumors greater than or equal to 10mm, and 39.2% of the 125 had cancer cells spreading outside the thyroid^{9,10}. Although I am not a cancer expert, it appears these numbers show that many of these cases were serious and not “small, harmless tumors” that happened to be found due to the screening effect.

Furthermore, the official number of children who have been operated on for malignant or suspected thyroid tumors now stands at 204¹¹, even though the increase would have plateaued after a while if the so-called screening effect were really to blame⁷.

More disturbing is the fact that “official figures” were not even close to being complete. A patient was only counted as a “child thyroid cancer in Fukushima” if aged 0-18 years at the

The MoE now claims that soil with radioactive levels up to 80 times what was previously allowed is now harmless enough to be spread around Japan with “careful management.”

time of the accident and in the roughly 360,000 target population of the Thyroid Ultrasound Examinations (TUE) (in the Fukushima Health Management (FMU) Survey (県民健康調査)¹² AND classified as B (nodules greater than or equal to 5.1 mm or cysts greater than or equal to 20.1 mm) or C (suspicious finding other than A2 or B) in the first TUE thyroid gland ultrasound test, AND diagnosed by FNAC in the secondary examination within the TUE of the FHM survey. This excludes children who were recommended for watchful waiting (“follow-up”) and diagnosed elsewhere before the second TUE ultrasound test, and children who moved and were operated on in other prefectures, according to Diet member Taro Yamamoto¹³. These points have also been criticized by Dr. Yuri Hiranuma, member of Physicians for Social Responsibility, who notes that “this means that the FMU studies using the official, incomplete data lack scientific integrity.”⁹ At the same House of Representatives’ Special Committee on Reconstruction meeting, a deputy-director in

the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) Hiroki Hamaya answered that there were actually 1082 thyroid cancer surgeries in nine designated hospitals in Fukushima from 2011 to 2015 (although this number includes adults), a number which apparently still does not include all children who were operated for thyroid cancer because thyroid cancer surgeries do not require special certifications or equipment and can be performed in non-designated hospitals, according to MHLW deputy-director Hashimoto, and also because under the new “DPC” medical billing database system, cases treated in hospitals that performed less than 10 surgeries for thyroid cancer are not counted, either¹³.

I’m sorry if this article has included too much technical jargon, but as much as possible, I wanted to cite things and connect them directly to the official sources. At the very least, the passive nods of the MHLW representatives at the above meeting seemed to be an official acknowledgment that the official numbers are inaccurate, and it is my hope that the parents of those children do not let the doctors wait watchfully for too much longer because it may be too late.

Footnotes

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- 2) MoE: Interim Storage Facility, Environmental Remediation (<https://tinyurl.com/ydhu2kv2>)
- 3) Ministry of the Environment: “Efforts towards Environmental Regeneration in the Disaster Areas <Outline>,” April 9, 2018, p. 7 (<https://tinyurl.com/ybjssqel>)
- 4) 2020 is a big year in the decontamination/Fukushima regeneration industry: they want everything to look normal when they stage the softball and baseball games of the Tokyo Olympics in Fukushima. (<https://tinyurl.com/ycnpd4qc>)
- 5) Tokyo Shinbun: 原発汚染土 公共工事で再利用 苦肉の策 安全性に問題は？ [Reusing radio-contaminated soil in public construction projects—A last resort with questionable safety], June 6, 2017 (<https://tinyurl.com/yxcs9j69>)
- 6) Nikkei Shinbun: 除染土、農地造成に再利用 環境省方針 [MoE draws out new policy to reuse decontamination soil in horticulture] (<https://tinyurl.com/y9vqonoa>)
- 7) Cancer in Canada Fact Sheet Series #1: Thyroid cancer in Canada - CDIC: Vol 34, No 1, February 2014 (<https://tinyurl.com/yd9gk58c>)
- 8) Association between screening and the thyroid cancer “epidemic” in South Korea: evidence from a nationwide study (<https://tinyurl.com/yan9tzqx>)
- 9) Yuri Hiranuma, Fukushima Thyroid Examination Fact Sheet: September 2017 (<https://tinyurl.com/ybwhcc6p>)
- 10) Dr. Shinichi Suzuki, Childhood and Adolescent Thyroid Cancer after the Fukushima NPP Accident” presented at the 5th International Expert Symposium in Fukushima on Radiation and Health, posted 09/26-7/2016 (<https://tinyurl.com/y8ekmxyz>) and (<https://tinyurl.com/y9u9y466>)
- 11) <https://tinyurl.com/yc9mugyp>
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- 13) 【山本太郎事務所編集】2017.4.14復興特別委員会「1082人の甲状腺がんについて」Taro Yamamoto: “1082 cases of thyroid cancer” at the House of Representatives’ Special Committee on Reconstruction (<https://tinyurl.com/ybxc4quw>)