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Hopes of Home Fade Among Japan's Displaced

By [MARTIN FACKLER](#)

AIZU-WAKAMATSU, Japan — As cold northerly winds sprinkle the first snow on the mountains surrounding this medieval city, those who fled here after last year's Fukushima nuclear disaster are losing hope that they will ever return to their old homes.

The mayor of Okuma, a town near the Fukushima Daiichi plant that was hastily evacuated when a huge earthquake and tsunami crippled the reactors' cooling systems on March 11, 2011, has vowed to lead residents back home as soon as radiation levels are low enough. But the slow pace of the government's cleanup efforts, and the risk of another leak from the plant's reactors, forced local officials to admit in September that it might be at least a decade before the town could be resettled.



A growing number of evacuees from Okuma have become pessimistic about ever living there again. At a temporary housing complex here in Aizu-Wakamatsu, a city 60 miles west of the plant, the mostly elderly residents say they do not have that much time or energy left to rebuild their town.

Many said they preferred plans that got them out of temporary housing but helped them maintain the friendships and communal bonds built over a lifetime, like rebuilding the town farther away from the plant.

“I was one of those who kept saying, ‘We will go back, we will go back!’ ” said Toshiko Iida, 78, who fled her rice farm three miles south of the plant. “Now, they are saying it will be years before we can go back. I’ll be dead then.”

Such feelings of resignation are shared by many of the 159,000 people who fled their towns after the earthquake and tsunami caused a triple meltdown at the Fukushima plant, spewing radiation over a wide area of northeastern Japan in the worst nuclear accident since the 1986 disaster at Chernobyl, in what was then the Soviet Union.

After first being reassured by the authorities that the accident was not so bad, then encouraged as the government began its costly decontamination effort, many evacuees are finally accepting that it may take decades, perhaps generations, before their town could be restored to anything like it was before the disaster.

“We all want to go back, but we have to face the obvious,” said Koichi Soga, 75, a retired carpenter who once worked on reactor buildings at the plant. “Look at the Soviet Union. They are still not back, right?”

Such sentiments have led to a very public loss of hope by the 11,350 displaced residents of Okuma, one of nine communities within 12 miles of the stricken plant that were evacuated.

After living in school gymnasiums and other shelters for about a month, Okuma’s town hall officials and about 4,300 of its residents relocated to temporary sites in Aizu-Wakamatsu, with most of the rest scattered as far as Tokyo, about 140 miles away. The mayor, Toshitsuna Watanabe, immediately began drawing up plans for returning to Okuma that called for a group to resettle a small corner of the town where radiation levels were relatively low. The settlers would then slowly expand the livable areas, decontaminating one street or building at a time, like colonists reclaiming a post-apocalyptic wilderness.

Last fall, the plan won de facto approval when Okuma residents re-elected Mr. Watanabe over a challenger who had called for building a new town at a safer location. Hopes were still high early this year when the Environmental Ministry began a decontamination program, with a budget of \$4.8 billion for 2012 alone, that employed a small army of workers to scrape away top soil, denude trees and scrub down buildings in Okuma and other evacuated communities.

But the ministry said this summer that an experimental effort to decontaminate a 42-acre area in Okuma had failed to reduce radiation dosages by as much as had been hoped, leading officials to declare most of the town uninhabitable for at least another five years. That forced Okuma’s officials to change the target date of their “road map” for repopulating the town to 2022, instead of 2014.

“People are giving up because we have been hit by negative news after negative news,” said Mr. Watanabe, 65, who set up a temporary town hall in a former girls’ high school on a corner of Aizu-Wakamatsu’s six-century-old castle. “Keeping our road map is the only way to hold onto hope, and prevent the town from disappearing.”

Mr. Watanabe admits that his plan has a dwindling number of adherents. In response to a questionnaire sent to Okuma’s evacuees by the town hall in September, only 11 percent of the 3,424 households that responded said they wanted to go back, while 45.6 percent said they had no intention of ever returning, mostly because of radiation fears.

Hopes for a return took another blow in early November, when Environmental Ministry officials told Mr. Watanabe that they planned to build as many as nine temporary storage facilities in Okuma for dirt and other debris from the cleanup. Many evacuees said they did not want to go back if their town was to be used as a dumping ground for radioactive refuse.

At the temporary housing site, where prefabricated apartments stood in rows like barracks on a former soccer field, many evacuees said they had been allowed to return to their homes in Okuma wearing hazmat suits and masks on tightly monitored, one-hour visits to retrieve some belongings. Many said that as the months passed, it was becoming more difficult emotionally to think about spending the time and energy to rebuild.

“My house has become a playground for mice,” said Hiroko Izumi, 85, adding, “Every time I go back, it feels less and less like my home.”

Many others said the town needed to move fast to keep its relatively small number of working-age residents, who were already beginning to find jobs and start new lives in places like Aizu-Wakamatsu.

“If too much time passes, Okuma could just disappear,” said Harue Soga, 63, a health care worker.

For those who do not want to move back, Okuma drew up an alternative plan in September that calls for building a new town on vacant land safely outside the evacuation zone around the plant. The new town — including a town hall, fire and police stations and housing — would be built within five years.

Mr. Watanabe admits that he is now among a minority of former residents who are still determined to go back to the original Okuma. He describes an almost spiritual attachment to the land where his family has grown rice for at least 19 generations, and that holds the family graves that Confucian tradition forbids him to abandon.

“We have been living there for 1,000 years,” he said. “I have promised myself that one day, I will again eat my own rice grown on my ancestral farm.”