The first Koshogatsu festival since the accident

Heavy snow had been falling since the day before in Minami Soma City on the Pacific coast of Fukushima Prefecture. Despite the weather, 40 people from both inside and outside Fukushima gathered at Kouichi Nemoto’s house in the Odaka District on January 14 to celebrate Koshogatsu, the traditional lunar New Year festival of Japanese farm houses.

They pounded mochi (rice cake) with wooden mallets, and enjoyed eating it served various ways. They stuck red and white mochi balls with red maple branches. This traditional decoration is called inaho (rice ear). Elsewhere it’s called dangosashi (skewered dumplings) or mochibana (rice cake flowers), to pray for the bounty of the grain in the new year.
This is the first Koshogatsu festival for Mr. Nemoto at his home in Odaka since the nuclear accident in 2011. When the accident happened, he had to move to a safer place with his family leaving his house, farmland and most of his belongings.

The Great East Japan Earthquake of March 11, 2011 triggered a critical accident of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, which caused massive release of radioactive materials. Wind carried the radiation not only across Fukushima, but all over Japan. The government issued an evacuation order for a 20 km radius from the nuclear power plant, based on the Disaster Countermeasures Basic Act. After March 22nd, the area was designated as a restricted area (exclusion zone). Even residents were not allowed to return without special permission.

Odaka is one of the areas classified as restricted area. After taking shelter in his friend’s house for a month, Nemoto moved to Kariage, government-subsidized evacuee housing up the coast in Soma City, together with his wife and his son’s family. It was totally uncertain when they could return to their home.

**Return to the worn-out homeland**

In April 2012, the government announced rearrangement of the restricted area. According to the new category, Odaka was reclassified as “areas to which evacuation orders are ready to be lifted”, where residents are allowed daytime visits but not overnight stays.

After the restriction was eased in Odaka, volunteers removed earthquake and tsunami debris and cut grass at unattended farmlands during summer vacation season. Only a few residents come back from temporary housing and clean their own homes during the day.
Unexpectedly, the radiation level in this area is often lower than the average in Fukushima City—excluding highly contaminated radioactive “hot spots”—even though it is closer to the nuclear power plant.

Nemoto decided to start growing rice again in Odaka. It would be surprising if farmers could restart agriculture and grow safe crops which meet the government safety standard only about 10km from crippled nuclear power plant. Nemoto wanted to prove that it’s possible.

However, it was not easy to realize the decision. Not being plowed for more than one year, all the fields were covered by tall weeds. Wild animals often appear to eat agricultural products. With very few residents returned, speed of recovery of the infrastructure was very slow.

To cultivate or not to cultivate?

More difficult problem for Nemoto was that authority didn’t allow him to grow rice. Negotiating with the authority of Minami Soma city for many times, finally he was allowed to grow rice as test cultivation, to examine whether the radioactive materials are absorbed in the crops or not. In the last season, Nemoto grew rice in the test field and measured radiation in the crops. The result was under 20 Becquerel per kilogram, well below the government limit of 100 Bq/kg.

In the end of the year 2012, Minami Soma city’s agriculture restoration council discussed about rice cultivation in the city in the year 2013. Different from Nemoto’s expectation, the council decided not cultivating rice in the coming season, as some farmers feared backlash if contaminated rice was shipped from the area. Restriction of rice cultivation in the city held for a third year. Nemoto and other organic farmers objected that the council did not represent all local farmers.

Like others, Nemoto faces an uncertain future. As the residents from contaminated areas have received compensation from TEPCO (the Tokyo Electric Power Company) based on their income before the accident, some farmers gave up farming and left their lands.

But Nemoto keeps returning to the contaminated farmland as before. He keeps plowing. He believes, that’s all a farmer can do.
Effort for talking with consumers in the big cities

In Fukushima, some organic farmers have continued cultivating since their land was contaminated by nuclear fallout. They have regularly measured the radioactivity of harvested crops and tried to take various measures to prevent the crops from absorbing radioactive materials.

As a result, it is gradually understood that compared to Chernobyl, much lower levels of contamination have been found in most Fukushima crops. This is because fertile soil binds radioactive isotopes like Cesium 134 and 137, preventing crops from absorbing them.

After the disaster, some Fukushima farmers opposed cultivation, to avoid growing contaminated food. Other farmers said “we should cultivate anyway to test whether these farm products are contaminated. Cultivation is the work of famers.”

In the last autumn, Fukushima prefectural government introduced radiation measurement test for all the package of rice harvested in the prefecture. As a result, 98.8 percent of rice tested below 25 Becquerel per kilogram, well below the government limit of 100 Bq/kg.

However, even if radiation detected from crops are far below the standard and it was clearly shown, it is still difficult to sell rice produced in Fukushima. Most of the consumers in the big cities like Tokyo avoid Fukushima products regardless of the radiation measurement result. Especially, mothers of small children are sensitive about radiation in food. They seek 0 Becquerel foods as far as possible, but sometimes they select farm products not based on measurement result but place of production.

To communicate with consumers in the big city, Fukushima organic agriculture network opened a new shop cum restaurant in Tokyo in March 2013. They sell their agricultural products that passed radiation screening and serve local cuisine of Fukushima cooked with their vegetables.

Through such effort, they are starting talking with consumers in Tokyo who are concerned about radiation contamination in farm products. They believe, sincere dialogue between farmers and consumers on radiation is most important for restoration of agriculture in Fukushima.

Toshiyuki Takeuchi: Director of JANIC Fukushima Office
Emiko Fujioka: Information Officer of JANIC Fukushima Office
On April 22, 2011, Fukushima Prefecture was divided into the following sectors:

1) **Restricted Area**
   - 20 km radius around Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, including the Odaka ward of Minami-Soma City. Entry to the area is basically prohibited.

2) **Deliberate Evacuation Area**
   - Areas other than Restricted Area, where the annual cumulative radiation dose was expected to reach 20 mSv (milli sieverts) per year. Overnight stay is prohibited. It is permitted to pass through, or to commute to workplace whose continued operation is approved by local administrators. Public facilities such as schools and hospitals are closed.

3) **Evacuation prepared areas in case of emergency**
   - 20-30 km radius from Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. Pregnant women and people with special health needs are not permitted. Facilities for seniors and people with disabilities, hospitals, and schools cannot operate. This order was lifted in September 2011.

4) **Regions including Specific Spots Recommended for Evacuation**
   - Areas which contain sites of high radioactive contamination, with a cumulative dose of at least 20mSv/y. Residents can get government support for evacuation.

The boundaries of each area were changed since 2012, one year after the accident.

1) **Restricted Area**
   - 20km radius from Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant other than the area 2), 3) & 4)

2) **Areas to which evacuation orders are ready to be lifted**
   - Entry is permitted but overnight stay is still not permitted. Areas where it is confirmed that the annual integral dose of radiation will definitely be below 20mSv. includes Odaka.

3) **Areas in which residents are not permitted to live**
   - Areas where the annual integral dose of radiation is expected to be 20mSv or more and where residents are ordered to remain evacuated in order to reduce the risk of radiation exposure. Residents are allowed to enter only during daytime. Entry is not recommended.

4) **Areas where it is expected that residents will face difficulties in returning for a long time**
   - Areas where the annual integral dose of radiation is expected to be 20mSv or more within five years and the current integral dose of radiation per year is 50mSv or more. Basically no entry.

5) **Specific Spots Recommended for Evacuation**
Current status of restricted areas and areas to which evacuation orders has been issued (As of April 1st, 2013~)

Map modified from the materials distributed by Ministry of Trade and Industry
Background Facts

More than 150,000 Fukushima people are still displaced

Though 2 years has passed since the Great East Japan Earthquake and the nuclear accident of Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, 154,148 Fukushima residents are still displaced, with 57,135 outside the prefecture and 97,013 within.

The population of the evacuees from Fukushima is the greatest in Yamagata prefecture, which has 9,420 as of March 2013. The next is in Tokyo, with 7,415 evacuees.

The Number of Evacuees from Fukushima Prefecture to Other Prefectures as of Mar.7, 2013

※Map modified from data provided by Fukushima Prefectural Government, extracted the number of evacuees from Fukushima from the original research data “The number of evacuees caused by earthquake disaster based on the area for refuge” by the Reconstruction Agency
Background Facts

Safety standards for radioactive cesium in food products

In April 2012, the ministry of health, labour and welfare of Japan introduced new standards for radioactive cesium in food products.

The rule is tougher than the prior—for example, the limit for general foodstuffs such as rice, meat, seafood, vegetables and fruites is 100 becquerels of radiation per kilogram, down from 500 becquerels/kg, the prior limit introduced after the nuclear accident.

Before the accident, the limit for imported food items was 370Bq/kg.

Standard limits for radioactive cesium in food products (April 2012–)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>general food</th>
<th>Infant food</th>
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<th>drinking water</th>
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<tr>
<td>Limit</td>
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<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Unit : Bq/Kg)

Notes: These limits take into account the contribution of radioactive strontium, plutonium etc.


About this news letter

Stories & Facts from Fukushima is a newsletter presenting real stories of Fukushima and its background after the nuclear disaster of Fukushima No.1 Nuclear Power plant happened on Mar.11, 2011.

Having 2 years passed since the disaster, this newsletter aims to introduce present situation of Fukushima people (both living inside and outside Fukushima) and to explain the facts behind their life.

Some of the contents are linked to our website, Fukushima on the Globe(www.fukushimaontheglobe.com). Please see the site as well as this newsletter.

We welcome your feedback.

Donors for the project

Our project in Fukushima is funded by organizations as listed below;

- Church World Service Asia-Pacific (A member of Act Alliance)
- International Medical Corps
- Direct Relief International
- Shinnyo-En
- Rissho Kosei-kai
- Annon Fund