At Fukushima, the population is in an inextricable situation

Temporary shelters at the Ushigoe camp for people displaced by the Fukushima nuclear disaster in Minami Soma, Japan, Aug. 28, 2013.

Four years after the explosion of a nuclear power plant in Fukushima, the fate of the victims is far from settled. Researcher Cécile Asanuma-Brice deciphers the policy that encourages these people to resettle into contaminated areas.

Residing in Japan for nearly fifteen years, Cecile Asanuma-Brice is working at the CNRS office in Tokyo and is a researcher associate at the research center of the Maison Franco-Japonaise of Tokyo and the International Associated Laboratory of "Human protection and disaster response" (HPDR), created by the CNRS and other French and Japanese institutions, following the Fukushima disaster on March 11th 2011, when an earthquake and tsunami caused the explosion of a nuclear power plant in the region, the following day.

How many people remain displaced? What conditions do they live under?

Cécile Asanuma-Brice: The Japanese government reported 118,812 people displaced, including 73,077 within the Fukushima prefecture and 45,735 outside of it. It represents a decrease since the same official statistics showed 160,000 displaced persons in 2011, a few months after the disaster. In reality, the number of displaced people is much higher than that. Because the registration system, set up by the Administration is extremely restrictive and a significant part of the population did not participate. I personally interviewed several families gathered in various associations who refused to register, because it led them to lose rights, particularly with regards to their free medical care and follow up.

Initially, the Japanese government had made available public housing across the territory for victims wishing to relocate for free. This directive was positive, even if it did not come with comprehensive employment support that would have eased these migrants into their host habitat. However, this directive was terminated in December 2012. Simultaneously, temporary housing were built, but partly on contaminated areas, if we refer to the
contamination distribution map produced by the Japanese Government Ministry of Research.

The law stipulates that life in these "temporary" units is limited to two years, given the unsuitableness of these housings. But what was to be temporary had become an ongoing ordeal. Refugees living on these public lands on the outskirts of the city pay for electricity, gas, water and found themselves having to buy food they were otherwise producing themselves - as most being farmers. The 100,000 yen monthly compensation income (about 790 dollars) paid to them by Tepco, the nuclear plant management company, is insufficient to cover these costs. Consequently, discrimination is setting in, pointing refugees as "leeches", which is extremely frowned upon in a country that places such a high value on work ethics.

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November 9th, 2013, Mr. Onuma 大沼勇治 and his wife came to dispose of the bones of their family member in the temple of Futaba, their home town, which is today uninhabitable because of radiation. On the street banner behind them, we read: “The nuclear energy for a bright future 原子力　明るい未来の　エネルギー.”

Do people express the desire to return home? What is the dominant state of mind?
C. A.-B. : Many families live far from their home villages, while fathers continue to work in the municipalities they lived in. A majority of them own their house or apartment; they have mortgages and it is therefore very difficult for them to give up everything without an official
assistance for the right to evacuate, which would include financial compensations and help in securing employment in the hosting town. This actually could be made possible if we consider the huge amount of money being spent on ineffective decontamination practices. Furthermore, these people live in a constant state of uncertainty, which results in a high divorce rate, suicides and nervous breakdowns ...

Nevertheless, the government nourishes these refugees with hopes of a possible return and tends to gradually reopen areas that were previously prohibited to live. Thus, the special regulations of the nine local authorities around the plant have been completely removed, which covers a population of 76,420 people. Just under two-thirds of them - 51,360 people to be exact – are stuck in an area labeled "preparation to lift evacuation order" zone – wherein radiation level is below 20 millisieverts (mSv) - which means they can move freely within these parts during daytime to take care of their households or attend work. The cancellation of these regulations was put in effect in 2014. In the "residence restriction" zone, which covers 25% of the population (19,230 people), it is possible to get in and out freely during the day but not to work.

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February 2012 – Citizens went to the Parliament to call on a vote for the Right to Shelter. The law to protect victims of the disaster were to be voted in June of the same year, but remained empty of all prerogatives.

You condemn the abuse of the concept of resilience - as you mentioned – in effect, confining the population to "house arrest".
C. A.-B.: To convince people to return, governments rely heavily on this concept of
resilience which, in this case, underlines an exploitation of an epistemological abuse. Intertwining psychological, environmental and urban resiliencies motivate residents to abandon any impulses of escaping - for those still following their primal instinct of anxiety in face of danger! To communicate on risks is important for this concept of resilience to thrive. We have to accept that we now live in a "risk society", to quote a book title wherein Ulrich Beck theorized that idea. The risk society, according to him, is “a society where exceptional conditions threaten to become the norm”. In this case, protection standards are tampered with, to contain the spread of the zones to be evacuated and to nourish the illusion of an eventual return to normalcy.

Thus, levels of radioactivity in the air and on the ground in certain areas exceed 10 to 20 times the 1 mSv/year international standard of contamination allowed for the civilian population. By April 2011, authorities raised the standard to 20 mSv/year around the most contaminated areas and it is currently being pushed to 100 mSv/year! Same levels are implemented for food, for which the maximum standards also vary. This communication strategy was enforced in 2014 with a budget of over 2 million Euros, for the purpose of, dare I say, "educating" about health risks with hopes to restore confidence. For example, they organize workshops with topics on radiation and cancer for primary school children in Fukushima, distributing textbooks, teaching them how to adapt to their new contaminated environment. All this is made possible with the push of television campaigning for the safety of fresh products from contaminated areas, consequently touting the effectiveness of decontamination - which still has not been proven to this day.
Advertising for the sale fruits and vegetables from the region of Fukushima. “Supporting farmers in Fukushima!

This strategy is part of a program already in use in Chernobyl

C. A.-B.: The players involved in the management of the Japanese disaster are partly the same ones who were involved into “managing” the nuclear crisis in Chernobyl. This is the case of Jacques Lochard, director of CEPN (Center for study on radiation protection in the nuclear field) and Dr. Shunichi Yamashita, a member of the health survey committee, one of the first to have advocated raising the safety standard to 100 mSv / year and Professor Niwa of the Fukushima Medical University. Pr. Niwa is a psychiatrist who is pushing for the
return of refugees, in response to climbing rates of depression and suicide cases, which are related to the pain of being separated from their homeland.

Therefore, refugees are forced to take decisions on their own, while being fully aware they are not given the means to escape or to truly reintegrate for those wanting to stay put. In other words, they are forced to manage their lives in a contaminated environment. It is precisely the purpose of the program Ethos Fukushima, which follows the cursus of the Ethos Chernobyl program, both led by Jacques Lochard and in which Dr Yamashita and Dr Niwa play a fundamental role. This program is based on the calculation of cost/benefit analysis in radiation risk management and aims to guide people on how to manage their lives in a contaminated environment, while evacuation is being considered too expensive.

The other goal of ETHOS is to boost the economy in regions affected by the disaster, encouraging the consumption of food products originating from contaminated areas. Business agreements are dealt with chains of supermarkets throughout the territory, which then direct their main distribution towards the sale of these products almost exclusively.

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The town of Tomioka, a few kilometers from the plant, was reopened for housing.

**How do people react to this?**

C. A.-B. : One must admit these methods of brainwashing are very efficient, despite a significant resistance facing this crucial health issue. Most assuredly, the politics of communication deployed here is very effective in manipulating people’s minds. Thus, workshops are organized for children evacuees to be reintroduced to their cultural land
they left. Administrative staff from the Fukushima Prefecture, including psychologists, initiates contact with the families by traveling where they have evacuated to and request to them to participate in organized meetings between children of the same age, from shut down school classes in their region – so they don’t lose touch. Once they have returned, they make the children cook together, retracing, in particular, each ingredient’s origins (i.e. mentioning grandparent’s harvest etc....). Thus, it fills them with nostalgic childhood memories and affects them with a strong sense of guilt for having abandoned friends and communities. This is all very well-orchestrated and unfortunately works. Children who were finally beginning to recreate new benchmarks in their new environment, return to their parents after these meetings and end up asking them when will they be able to return home to Fukushima. Some families are not fooled by this scheme and fight back by organizing entire networks to guide refugees who seek help to better fit in and organize sessions where they also warn of pitfalls in which not to fall for.