

Earthquake Record of Okuma

from the town where Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station is located.



Okuma Town

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【Summary Version】

 Okuma Town

On Publication of This Record



Toshitsuna Watanabe,
Mayor, Okuma Town

Six years have passed since the Great East Japan Earthquake, which struck at 14:46 on the afternoon of March 11, 2011. I would like to express my deep condolences for the people who lost their lives in the disaster or died during their subsequent evacuation and my heartfelt sympathy to all those who have been affected.

On that day, while being astonished by the magnitude of the quake, my first concern was the tsunami. I set up a disaster countermeasures headquarters in the second floor lobby of the municipal office building and gave instructions on response to the earthquake and tsunami. Pictures of tsunami along the Tohoku coastline were being broadcast on television constantly, and a big disaster was expected. To be honest, at that time I wasn't thinking about the nuclear power station that much.

Regarding the situation at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station of Tokyo Electric Power Co. (TEPCO), which was located in our town, after the earthquake a member of our staff reported to me that its operation had been halted. The three principles for safety at nuclear power stations are "halt, cool, contain." I thought that if operation had been halted, then the next steps, cool and contain, would follow. The words "just in case" stuck out in my memory of the day. When it came to the situation of the nuclear power station, rather than a crisis, I was thinking in terms of making preparations just in case. Even when, in the early morning of March 12, we received an order for the whole town to evacuate from Goshi Hosono, then assistant to the prime minister, I was quite calm, thinking that we would be able to return in two or three days. Like the other citizens, I left our town in the same clothes that I had been wearing since staying at the municipal government building since the previous day.

About forty years had passed since the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station had started operating. Even if there were problems, we just didn't imagine anything like evacuation of the whole town or an explosion. The same was true for drills and disaster preparation. Following the accident, National Highway No. 288, which we used for evacuation, was chockablock. Before the accident there had been talks with the prefecture and national government about widening the road, but we were told that taking evacuation measures would only stir up anxiety among the residents, and I concurred. Belief in the safety of nuclear power had permeated my mind, and the sense of danger that I had initially harbored had dimmed. Now I realize that that is the risk when you live near and co-exist with a nuclear power station for four decades. If, at the time of the evacuation, the sense of crisis that the government and TEPCO had had been properly conveyed to the town, at the very least I might have been able to tell our citizens to take necessities for a few days and valuables with them. If the citizens had realized the critical situation, however, there would have been panic, and smooth evacuation prior to the explosion would have been impossible. It was extremely difficult. But whatever the case, my biggest regret now is that I was overconfident about the safety of the nuclear power station.

At the gymnasium in Tamura City, where we were evacuated, I awoke many times during the night thinking it must have been a bad dream. But then I saw our head of education and the speaker of the town assembly sleeping nearby, and I knew that this was not a nightmare but reality. Every morning I awoke wondering what kind of day it would be. I couldn't even plan the day ahead. I had to explain to our citizens, so I asked a government official to give me a responsible report every day about our situation. In the end, however, our main source of information was the television. Lacking any reliable information, our citizens, staff, and everyone in the municipality that had accepted us were full of anxiety.

After we had been eating nothing but bread for some time, one day the evacuation shelter erupted in cheers when it was announced that today we were going to have rice and miso soup. Five days into our evacuation, members of the Self-Defense Forces installed a bath, and for the first time in what seemed like ages I heard laughter from citizens soaking in the tub. And the residents of Tamura, while saying there was nothing much they could do for us, came in light trucks loaded with rice and paraffin. Such incidents gave me delight but at the same time made me aware of the seriousness of our plight.

We held a celebratory graduation meeting at the Tamura gymnasium for sixth-grade elementary school students who had been unable to have a proper graduation ceremony. While we received many expressions of joy and encouragement, it was also pointed out that even schools in Tamura had been unable to hold graduation and end-of-year ceremonies. I also received a phone call from a parent evacuated outside the prefecture who had seen a report of the meeting on television, saying that "My child couldn't join in the celebrations. The television report made me very sad." It was also at the gymnasium where I received a phone call from Masao Yoshida, then manager of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station. "I'm very sorry about this situation," he said in a strained voice. "We are doing all we can to get things under control." If raising my voice would have helped find a solution, I would have shouted a hundred times. But I didn't feel like shouting then. What was the right way forward? What should we do? At that time, we were frantically searching for solutions to questions that did not have any correct answers.

Despite the fact that they themselves had been victims and often did not know the whereabouts of loved ones, our staff worked hard from around five o'clock in the morning until about two o'clock in the night. I was told by a doctor who came to volunteer that if they carried on in this way, the employees would collapse, but I was unable to give them sufficient rest. About two weeks after the disaster it was decided that the city of Aizu-Wakamatsu would help out. I thought it was a hasty decision, but my main concerns were the care of our citizens and enabling our staff to work in a little more relaxed environment. Even after we moved to Aizu-Wakamatsu, though, since their work had changed overnight because of the disaster, I had to ask them to work beyond the call of duty.

Regarding the reconstruction of our town, sometimes I hear criticism that it is going too slowly, and sometimes I receive praise for having come so far. I keep asking myself whether enough is being done. Yet I am also proud of the fact that reaching the stage of special home visits in the sixth year after the disaster is the result of the efforts of our staff who have worked together to achieve recovery. I want each one of our employees to go about their work with a feeling of confidence. We are also receiving assistance from municipalities that have accepted evacuees and other parties. We couldn't have got through these six years without this support, and I am immensely grateful.

I think six years has been too long a time for the citizens to just wait until their return. Our Okuma ancestors also faced famines and other difficulties, yet they built the history of the town over time through strenuous efforts. Now is the time for us to sweat and toil and build the foundations to make our community vigorous again. If we have the desire to pass on the town to the next generation, I believe we can definitely reconstruct our community. Unfortunately, the accident happened. Now I intend to learn from the experience and knowledge gained from the accident and make the utmost efforts to rebuild our attractive town.



On the Steep Road

[2011.3.11 ▶ 2017.3.11]

Unexpectedly Huge Tsunami



A large tsunami heads toward the Kumagawa coastal area



A tsunami hits the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station of Tokyo Electric Power Co. (TEPCO).
(Courtesy of Tokyo Electric Power Company Holdings, Inc.)



Overwhelmed by a huge tsunami, the Kumagawa area lies in ruin.

Unexpectedly Huge Tsunami

The Great East Japan Earthquake struck at 14:46 on the afternoon of March 11, 2011. In the town of Okuma in Fukushima Prefecture, located about 180 km southwest of the epicenter, the land rocked and cracked as well, and manholes flew out as a result of soil liquefaction. On the second floor of the municipal government office building, while holding on to a television set to stop it falling, a male staff member of the Living Environment Section, which was in charge of disaster prevention, read the measurement on the seismometer installed in the section: "Above 6!" When the swaying had subsided, he repeated in a loud voice the warning shown on the television he was holding down: "Large tsunami warning!"

In order to call on people to evacuate, four staff members of the section jumped into two PR cars and quickly headed for the Kumagawa district, where flooding was a concern. "A . . . large . . . tsunami . . . warning . . . has been . . . issued." The J-ALERT message was automatically broadcast in a drawling tone over the emergency radio system. In the intervals, staff members of the section who had remained in the government office building appealed to people not to go near the coast or river mouth and instructed residents in the Kumagawa district to evacuate to designated places. At 15:00 in the afternoon, a disaster countermeasures headquarters chaired by the mayor was set up in the second floor lobby of the municipal government office building. Staff of the Construction Section went out to check the state of damage to roads and buildings, and staff of the Planning and Coordination Section in charge of public relations also left to record the damage.

The first tsunami hit the town around 15:27, and the second arrived at about 15:36. According to estimates by the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station of Tokyo Electric Power Co. (TEPCO), which was located in the town, the size of the tsunami was 13 meters. By the time when the Meteorological Agency revised its forecast of the height of the tsunami from 3 meters or 6 meters to more than 10 meters, at half past three in the afternoon, the first tsunami had already arrived at the town's coastline. In its disaster-prevention plan, the town had imagined a tsunami of 5.3 meters. One evacuation center that had been expected to escape flooding was inundated. Since it was daytime on a Friday, a large number of the evacuees were elderly people. Thanks to the guidance of staff members, the local fire service, the district head, and others, more than a dozen people in the evacuation center were saved, although some of them were saturated. Later, however, it was learned that the flooding had covered an area of about 2 square kilometers along the coast and 12 citizens of the town had lost their lives.

Meanwhile, centered on the Planning and Coordination Section, the headquarters was frantically making efforts to check the situation at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station. Following the earthquake, the direct telephone to the nuclear power station, which sat on the section chief's desk, had been dead. The section confirmed that Fukushima Daiichi had been urgently halted and that there was no fire there at around 15:35; the information came via the Fukushima Daini Nuclear Power Station, which is located in the neighboring towns of Tomioka and Naraha. It was from around this time that the headquarters began to receive information from staff members about the state of damage and safety of residents throughout the town. Having confirmed that the nuclear power station had been halted, the headquarters concentrated even more on its response to the tsunami and earthquake.

As aftershocks continued, and the sun went down, because of the continuing blackout in the town, concern shifted to the possibility of secondary disasters occurring in relief and rescue activities. Fearing that another tsunami might arrive, the headquarters instructed residents on the eastern side of National Highway No. 6, which traverses the town, to evacuate to the municipal sports center. While showing the state of damage to roads and other facilities on a map and making preparations for full-fledged activities from the next morning, staff members also devoted their efforts to managing the evacuation center. Section chiefs joined in procuring food, water, power generators, lighting, and so on, and, in the middle of the night, staff began making rice balls at the sports center. Working under torchlight, they spent all night cooking rice. As if trying to encourage himself, one staff member called to his colleagues, "Come on, let's do our best! We've got to get through this night."



above: Okuma Mayor Toshitsuna Watanabe and senior officials of the municipal government gasp at reports of the disaster. (Courtesy of Fukushima Minyu Shimbun)
below: After the evacuation order, residents gathered at the municipal sports center gymnasium.

Sudden Evacuation Order



Residents board a bus following the order to evacuate from the area within a radius of 10 kilometers from the nuclear power station. (Courtesy of Yomiuri Shimbun)



Residents gather at the municipal government office for evacuation. (Courtesy of Yomiuri Shimbun)



above: The day after the disaster, Ibaraki Kotsu buses appeared at the municipal government office car park.
below: After guiding residents to evacuation, firefighters warm themselves in the gymnasium of Nakasato Elementary School in Miharu.



Sudden Evacuation Order

At around 6 o'clock in the morning of March 12, 2011, the phone rang in the General Affairs Section on the second floor of the Okuma municipal government office building. It was an assistant to the prime minister wanting to speak with the mayor to notify him about the order to evacuate the area within a radius of 10 kilometers of TEPCO's Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station. In parallel with the phone call, eyewitness information reached the town's disaster countermeasures headquarters that police were instructing people to evacuate outside the town. A police officer in the municipal government office called the Fukushima prefectural police and then reported that an evacuation order had indeed been issued. An evacuation order really should not come from the police, so a staff member called the Fukushima prefectural government to confirm the information with the official in charge.

The area within a radius of 10 kilometers of the nuclear power station covered just about the whole of Okuma, so it was virtually the same as an order for the entire town to evacuate. The order came just as the municipal government was getting ready to muster the fire service and others and set about relief and rescue activities in the wake of the earthquake. The staff member who had called the prefectural government couldn't help but raise his voice: "Are you telling us to abandon the town and flee?" The person on the other end of the line said nothing.

After the outbreak of the earthquake on March 11, TEPCO notified relevant governments about the state of emergency at Fukushima Daiichi in accordance with Articles 10 and 15 of the Act on Special Measures Concerning Nuclear Emergency Preparedness. At 21:23 in the evening of March 11, the central government issued an evacuation order for the area within a radius of 3 kilometers of the nuclear power station. The disaster countermeasures headquarters had confirmed the notifications from TEPCO by fax and the 3-kilometer evacuation order on television. However, TEPCO's notifications included the words "just in case," and on television the chief cabinet secretary was proclaiming, "At the present time there is no need for any special action." The municipal government's understanding, therefore, was that the 3-kilometer evacuation was just a precaution. Moreover, the area within 3 kilometers of the nuclear station meant the area to the east of National Highway No. 6, where most residents had already evacuated the day before to escape from the tsunami. So for most staff members and residents, the order to evacuate the whole town came as a complete surprise.

The prefectural government designated the city of Tamura as the evacuation destination. At 06:09, the municipal government ordered all residents over the emergency radio to gather at their nearest meeting places for evacuation. Perhaps because it had foreseen the evacuation of the whole town, the central government had already dispatched about 50 buses as the main means of transportation and was beginning to move residents from places near the nuclear power station, such as the sports center. As disaster drills had not supposed the evacuation of all residents out of the town, there was much confusion. Staff members also climbed on to the buses without knowing where they were going, only that they were heading west of National Highway No. 288. The evacuation centers in Tamura located nearest Okuma were full, and employees of Tamura's fire service standing on the roadside waved the buses on further west. "How far are we going?" By the early hours of March 13, Okuma residents had been dispersed to about 20 evacuation centers in Tamura, Miharu, Ono, and Koriyama.

By around two in the afternoon of March 12, Okuma was deserted. A few senior officials of the municipal government and about 10 firefighters and others remained in the municipal government office building, just in case any residents had failed to evacuate, but TEPCO staff at the headquarters urged them to go as well. At 15:36, a big boom was heard at the municipal government office building, which is located about 4.7 kilometers from Fukushima Daiichi. There had been a hydrogen explosion at the Unit 1 reactor. Immediately realizing the situation, the senior officials also quickly left the town.

After the departure from Okuma, the disaster countermeasures headquarters was set up again at Tamura's gymnasium. When the mayor, who had gone out to see the mayor of Tamura, and senior officials reunited in the gymnasium, it was not known where Okuma residents had been taken. And similarly, the staff members who had been evacuated to other places together with the residents did not know that the headquarters had been set up in Tamura. There were also residents who had evacuated to other places of their own accord. As neither cell phones nor radio were working, the only thing for the headquarters to do was to go round evacuation centers in the vicinity and check whether Okuma residents and staff members were there.



A satellite photo of Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station taken on March 14 after a hydrogen explosion.

A “Small Community” amid Uncertainty and Confusion



Many residents evacuated to the Tamura municipal gymnasium. (Courtesy of Tamura City)



above: An Evacuee reads newspaper reports of the nuclear power station accident.
below: Commotion erupts at an evacuation center when meals are served.

above: People cooperate in carrying relief supplies into an evacuation center. (Courtesy of Tamura City)
below: Screening inspection has been done to evaluate the dose of evacuees. (Courtesy of Tamura City)

A “Small Community” amid Uncertainty and Confusion

When they left Okuma following the evacuation order early in the morning of March 12, 2011, most residents, and government office staff members too, were not aware of the situation at TEPCO’s Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station and boarded buses with just enough belongings for two or three days. Most people learned for the first time about the March 12 hydrogen explosion at the Unit 1 reactor when they watched television at their places of evacuation. Subsequently the situation at Fukushima Daiichi grew worse with hydrogen explosions at the Unit 3 reactor at 11:01 in the morning of March 14 and at the Unit 4 reactor at around 06:14 in the morning of March 15. “Oh my . . .” All that staff members could hear coming from the mouths of residents glued to the evacuation center’s television were exclamations of astonishment and sighs of dismay. They were lost for words.

The evacuation centers sheltering Okuma residents numbered more than 20 facilities in Tamura, Miharu, Ono, and Koriyama alone. The municipal government established the disaster countermeasures headquarters at the Tamura gymnasium to collaborate with Tamura, and liaison officers were appointed to respond to developments in Miharu, Ono, and Koriyama. Other staff members went to the other evacuation centers to help with operations there. However, because the main evacuation centers were dispersed in the four municipalities, and because of the continuing shortage of official cars and gasoline, it was difficult to speedily share information between the headquarters and the evacuation centers. Since each evacuation center differed in terms of the form of support from the local municipality and facility administrator, the number of evacuees, the number of dispatched staff, and so on, in the end management of the evacuation centers was left virtually to each site.

While small evacuation centers had just a few dozen evacuees, larger centers sheltered more than 1,000 people, and there was a limit to what staff members could see to. The most worrying thing for staff members was how to look after the many people who had not brought medicine for existing illnesses with them. Among the evacuated Okuma residents they found medical personnel and asked them to “help us by keeping an eye out as best you can, and if you notice anything strange, let us know.” Local firefighters took over from staff members to respond to requests from evacuees and handle reception during the night. At some evacuation centers, local residents made the baths in their homes available for babies and infants and supplied vegetables, rice, and other food. Using kitchens at the evacuation centers and other facilities, the Okuma townspeople took the initiative and prepared hot meals with these ingredients. They took a role as patrols in the center, tidying up the garbage, cleaning . . . As one staff member remarked, “It was like a small community, with the evacuees cooperating among themselves.” This staff member is still full of gratitude to the evacuee who quietly refilled a thermos of hot water when she was too busy to do that task. In a strained environment, it was little things like this that kept the evacuation centers running.

When they left the town, people thought that it would not be long before they could meet again. But now they did not know whether others were still alive or where they had been evacuated to. And they did not know how long they themselves would have to stay in the evacuation centers and what would become of their town. While continuing their evacuation life, the townspeople were beset by increasing uncertainty and confusion. At that time, though, the staff members, and the disaster countermeasures headquarters, which had access to information from TEPCO and the central government, could not predict the future. In a diary kept at that time, one Okuma resident expressed concern about the safety of relatives and acquaintances. And when their safety was confirmed, there was only one wish: “I hope we can meet again . . .”



above: A graduation event for sixth-grade elementary school children was held at the evacuation center.
below: Many messages of thanks for the assistance were posted on the evacuation center bulletin board.

Restarting in Aizu-Wakamatsu



Snow covers the temporary housing in Aizu-Wakamatsu.



above: Residents enter the Okuma municipal government office branch set up in Aizu-Wakamatsu. (Courtesy of Kyodo News)
below: Construction proceeds on temporary housing in Aizu-Wakamatsu with a view of Mount Bandai.

above: Staff members and press attend the opening ceremony of the Aizu-Wakamatsu branch of the Okuma municipal government.

Restarting in Aizu-Wakamatsu

On March 25, 2011, about two weeks after the evacuation of the whole town, it was announced that Okuma would move its base of operations to the city of Aizu-Wakamatsu. The transfer from evacuation centers was to take place on April 3 and 4. The move was taken with a view to medium- to long-term evacuation. As well as local government functions, Okuma's municipal kindergartens and elementary and junior high schools were to be resumed in Aizu-Wakamatsu, and until the completion of emergency temporary housing, residents who so wished were to be accommodated in guesthouses and hotels in Aizu-Wakamatsu and its surroundings.

"Why Aizu-Wakamatsu?" Okuma residents who heard about the move from explanations by staff members at their evacuation centers or through media reports may have been puzzled.

After the evacuation of the whole town, hydrogen explosions had successively occurred at reactors at TEPCO's Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station, squashing all hope of a quick return. At the same time, it was clear that the health of the residents, who had been forced to evacuate in the clothes they were wearing, was deteriorating, both physically and mentally. There was also concern that staying in Tamura, which itself had set up a disaster countermeasures headquarters and included areas that had been ordered to evacuate, was placing a heavy burden on the administration there. Furthermore, as a new fiscal year began, some Okuma residents were expressing concern about their children's education. Recognizing that a base was necessary where the local government and residents of Okuma could think together about the future in a calm environment, the mayor, on the evening of March 17, instructed the head of education, who had come to consult with him about schools, to resume schooling from April and to select a place for that purpose.

In making the choice, as well as the securing of facilities that could be used as schools, consideration was given to such factors as the ability of the local administration to accept all Okuma residents who wished to come, the existence of reliable medical institutions, and distance from the nuclear power station. Aizu-Wakamatsu emerged as a candidate. When it was sounded out, in addition to an abandoned school that could be used, Aizu-Wakamatsu suggested using a closed nursery as a kindergarten and proposed a facility that could serve as a base for the Okuma municipal government. After talks between the mayors of Aizu-Wakamatsu and Okuma, the announcement was made on March 25.

Aizu-Wakamatsu is located about 100 kilometers to the west of Okuma. The two municipalities have vastly different climates and cultures. While Okuma is situated near the coast and has relatively warm weather even in winter, Aizu-Wakamatsu lies in a region of heavy snowfall. It was certainly not an area where Okuma residents could feel easily at home. Nevertheless, the number of residents wishing to move exceeded the Okuma municipal government's expectations. On April 3 and 4, around 2,100 people moved from their evacuation centers in Tamura to Aizu-Wakamatsu, and the number increased after that too. As of September 30, there were 3,723 Okuma residents living as evacuees in the city of Aizu-Wakamatsu and 4,175 in the Aizu region as a whole. The people of Aizu-Wakamatsu showed sympathy for the position of people who had lost their hometown. Sometimes referring to the ordeal of the Boshin Civil War (1868–69), they would say, "If we don't accept the people of Okuma, whatever will they do?"

On April 5, an auspicious day on the calendar, a ceremony was held for the opening of the Aizu-Wakamatsu branch of the Okuma municipal government in the former building of the Prefectural Aizu Gakuho Senior High School in Aizu-Wakamatsu. Standing in front of a banner proclaiming "Welcome!" in the local Aizu dialect, the Okuma mayor addressed the participants, saying, "Let's work together so that we can return to Okuma as soon as possible." The municipal kindergarten and elementary and junior high schools held entrance ceremonies on April 16 and commencement ceremonies on April 19. Temporary housing was constructed at 12 places in the city, and in June occupants began moving in.

Today (March 2017), six years after the disaster, the Okuma municipal government is still operating from its branch in the same place.



above: Newly admitted children were given satchels at a joint entrance ceremony for the municipal elementary and junior high schools.
below: New students of Okuma's junior high school attended the entrance ceremony wearing ordinary clothes instead of uniforms.

A Distant Hometown



Agricultural land in Okuma is covered in weeds.



Residents don protective clothing for temporary visits to their homes. (Courtesy of Kyodo News)



above: Four months after the disaster, a memorial service for tsunami victims was held in the Kumagawa district.
below: A child's satchel remains in a classroom at Kumamachi Elementary School, just as it was when the earthquake struck.



A Distant Hometown

In September 2012 the Okuma municipal government compiled a first reconstruction plan in which it clearly stated that a return to the town in the next five years was out of the question. The municipal government had been aiming for a return as soon as possible, but this was the first time for it to indicate a specific period during which there would be no return. A year and a half after the Great East Japan Earthquake, the severity of the situation was made evident.

On April 22, 2011, shortly after the Okuma municipal government had moved to Aizu-Wakamatsu, the whole town of Okuma was designated as a restricted area on the basis of the Act on Special Measures Concerning Nuclear Emergency Preparedness. Until then, even though the evacuation order had been issued, there had been no physical restrictions on road traffic. Residents would occasionally enter the town to search for belongings and livestock that they had left behind. In view of the empty houses, concerns about crime were increasing too. Still, although the municipal government had been asking the central government to take steps to protect the health and assets of residents, the designation of Okuma as a restricted area meant that even residents were no longer able to freely enter their town. In June, under the surveillance of the central government, short visits did begin, but initially residents were only able to stay in their homes for a couple of hours and to take back one vinyl bag (70 cm x 70 cm).

Even memorial services for disaster victims had to be carried out in a short time and wearing protective clothing. On July 24 a joint service was held for tsunami victims in the Kumagawa district, which suffered heavy damage from the tsunami. Speaking on behalf of the town residents, one man who was forced to evacuate on the day after the disaster despite the fact that three of his family members remained missing said, "Sometime we will return to live here and look out on the sea that took your lives."

In December of the same year the central government announced a policy of reorganizing the restricted area into three zones depending on the level of radiation. Among the three zones, the area where almost all of the residents lived had the highest radiation level and was designated as a "difficult-to-return zone," meaning that there was no prospect of the amount of radiation falling to a level permitting daily life for the next five years. The differences in classification were directly linked to the delineation of such things as soil decontamination, which was essential for the recovery of the town's land, and compensation, which was vital for residents to rebuild their livelihoods.

After almost a year of consultations with the central government lasting for about a year, on December 10, 2012, the town was reclassified as a "difficult-to-return zone" (covering 62% of the town's area and 96.5% of its population), a "restricted residence zone" (15% and 3.3%, respectively), and an "evacuation order cancellation preparation zone" (23% and 0.2%, respectively). Roads into the "difficult-to-return zone," where entry was strictly limited, were blocked by gates. Meanwhile, in the remaining two zones with relatively low radiation levels, soil decontamination by the central government proceeded, and residents were allowed free entry during the daytime.

The statement in the first reconstruction plan, issued prior to the zone reclassification, that a return to Okuma in the next five years was out of the question was made with the desire to maintain the unity of the town, which looked likely to be split by the different levels of radiation. However, five years is a long time. Even if people wanted to return, vacant houses and the townscape would fall into a state of disrepair. About three and a half years after the disaster, residents were allowed to temporarily visit their homes in the difficult-to-return zone. Making their way through waist-high grass, they climbed into their homes from the verandas with their outdoor shoes on to find grass growing from the tatami. "I wish radiation had a color," sighed one person "If my house were glowing deep red, perhaps then I might give up."



below: National Highway No. 288 was closed at the entrance to the difficult-to-return zone. / Someone vandalized vending machines in the town and stole money.

above: An ostrich roams around the deserted town.

Determination to Reconstruct



As the focus of restoration, the Ogawara district waits for construction work to begin.



Decontamination waste is carried to a provisional storage place of a temporary disposal facility.



above: The Ministry of Environment organized explanatory meetings for residents about temporary disposal facility.
below: Full-fledged construction begins on a temporary disposal facility in the town.

Determination to Reconstruct

On March 13, 2015, four years after the Great East Japan Earthquake, 12 black sandbags containing waste collected by soil decontamination arrived in the grounds of the Okuma-Higashi Industrial Estate. The temporary radioactive waste disposal facilities is to be built by the central government in the 16-square-kilometer “difficult-to-return zone” extending over the towns of Okuma and Futaba. It was the first time for radioactive waste to be brought into the town for storage there. The radioactive waste was to remain in the town for the next 30 years.

The temporary radioactive waste disposal facilities were places prepared by the central government to store radioactive waste collected inside Fukushima Prefecture after the accident at TEPCO’s Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station for 30 years. Following the accident, 43 municipalities in the prefecture conducted decontamination. The radioactive waste had been put into bags and kept in the municipalities. What to do with it had been a pending issue since immediately after the disaster. In October 2011 the central government announced an outline of facilities. In 2013 geological surveys were carried out at candidate sites, including Okuma, and in December of that year the central government made an official request to the town. In December 2014, after explanations to residents and other meetings, Okuma accepted the construction.

The area taken by disposal facilities in Okuma covered 11 square kilometers, the equivalent of about one-third of residential land. Owners would lose their homes, land, and townscape, and, if accepted, the desire to restore the town to the same appearance as it was before the disaster would be destroyed forever. For Okuma, the decision to accept the facilities was a huge one affecting all of the residents.

In March 2015, after the acceptance, the municipal government compiled a second reconstruction plan. The center of reconstruction was the Ogawara district in the southern part of the town. Before the disaster, only 3.3% of Okuma’s residents lived in this district, but it had low radiation levels and decontamination had been completed. On the eastern side of the town, temporary radioactive waste disposal facilities were being planned. Using the Ogawara district as a foothold, the policy was to improve the living environment for people who wanted to return or move to Okuma and, while keeping an eye on the progress of decontamination and radiation level trends, expand the scope. Already several projects were starting in the Ogawara district, including TEPCO’s meal service center, a solar power generation facility, a reactor decommissioning office, and a dormitory for TEPCO employees. In April 2016 the municipal government opened the Ogawara Liaison Office, with three people stationed there during the daytime. In August of the same year the central government permitted special overnight stays, and so for the first time since the disaster lights shone at night in houses in the town. A new municipal government office is scheduled to be completed in fiscal 2018.

Some people looked on these changes in the town with skepticism. As one resident said, “Now, when you go into Ogawara, there is a TEPCO meal service center and a TEPCO dormitory, and it looks wonderful. But when you think about it, they aren’t ours, are they? They are not facilities for the townspeople. Can you call that reconstruction? I don’t think so.” But looking at the surrounding townscape where decontamination had been completed, the same resident remarked, “It does give me a stronger desire to return myself.” The mayor stated, “It is my wish that the appearance of human activity in the town, which was previously deserted, will give hope to residents, regardless of whether they return or not.”

Six years after the disaster, at long last the dream of returning had a tinge of reality.



above: Related persons celebrate the opening of the Okuma municipal government’s Ogawara Liaison Office.
below: A family spends the evening together after returning home on a special overnight stay.

Experiences of Okuma Town

2011.3.11 ■ Interview

■ Interview From Ground Zero of the Nuclear Power Station Accident

01



Inhabitants of the
Nomagata district
Shigeo Tsuchiya

At the time of the disaster, I was working for a security company inside the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station of Tokyo Electric Power Co. (TEPCO). We were gathering information at an office in the precincts, but because of the blackout, when the sun went down, it became pitch dark. At around 9 in the evening, when we entered the main earthquake-resistant building, the only one with lights on, we were immediately prohibited from going outside. The nuclear reactors were already in a dangerous state. There was not enough protective clothing or masks for anyone other than the workers.

The earthquake-resistant building was crowded with employees of related companies and other people who spilled out into the corridors. I sat down in the corridor near the entrance to the response room, which had a big round table, and listened to news about the state of the reactors and the expanding evacuation order. Everybody was surprisingly calm, but then in the afternoon of March 12

there was a sudden boom. It was like an earthquake had struck directly below us. On a commercial television channel, there was a video of the explosion. "Ah, the Unit 1 reactor has exploded!" It was like being plunged to the bottom of an abyss. After that, while keeping an eye on conditions at the Unit 1 reactor, it was necessary to watch the pressure and temperature at Units 2 to 4 as well. In view of the number of people available, they couldn't possibly handle all four reactors simultaneously. There was pandemonium just coping with the immediate danger.

After the Unit 3 reactor exploded on March 14, I saw TEPCO's Masao Yoshida, then the manager of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station, lying down in a small room. He probably hadn't had much sleep and was exhausted. "Maybe I'm going to die here as well," I thought. At around 7 in the evening, I think it was, Mr. Yoshida appeared in the corridor and said, "We have taken various countermeasures, but things are not going in a good direction. If you can, please evacuate in your own cars or whatever." He added, "I can't provide you with protective clothing or anything, but now I'm going to open the door." I consulted with a dozen or so other employees of the security company about which cars we would get into. When the door opened, I immediately dashed to the office and jumped into my own car. I met up with my

wife at the Tamura city gymnasium. I remember saying to her at that time, "Brace yourself, because we won't be returning for 5 or 10 years."

After the accident, I have no desire to all of a sudden turn on TEPCO alone. I came back from Tokyo at 35 years of age, one of the reasons for my return being the nuclear power station. If there hadn't been any work, I wouldn't have come back. Until now the municipalities in the region, including our town, benefited from the nuclear power station, and people in the Kanto region got their electricity from it too. Although it is necessary to correct mistakes, I think it is wrong to come out in

complete opposition to nuclear power at a time when people are trying to bring the situation under control. There needs to be some kind of compromise somewhere.

Now the Ogawara district has become the focus of the town's reconstruction. There may be people who say "Nobody wants to live there." But the municipal government is working hard to build a place where people can return. While the district will serve as a base for people engaged in decommissioning of the reactors, former townspeople will be involved too. I think the only way forward for us is to construct a new town, little by little.

■ Interview Fulfilling Duties as SDF Personnel

02

Administrative Unit (Koriyama Camp)



Administrative Unit, 2nd Battalion Headquarters, 6th Artillery Regiment
(Koriyama Camp)

Yoshikazu Hashimoto

At the time of the disaster, Kazuhiko Kikuchi and Yoshikazu Hashimoto belonged to a regiment stationed at the Koriyama Camp of the Ground Self-Defense Force. From the evening of March 11 to the early hours of March 12, 2011, they were among the first SDF personnel to enter the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station. They performed their duties there despite the adverse conditions, such as a lack of information about the site and inadequate protective measures against radiation.

Hashimoto: At the time of the disaster, I was working in the command office of the 6th Artillery Regiment. In the evening of March 11, we received

information that, among the disaster areas to which we might be dispatched, special importance was being placed on the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station. Power supplies and water were needed to cool the nuclear reactors. It was decided to dispatch one fire engine (pump vehicle) and three power-supply vehicles from the camp.

As the person in charge of power supplies, I headed for the nuclear power station around 11 at night on March 11, led by a police car. At that time, although as an SDF officer I had knowledge about radiation relating to special weapon defense, I didn't know anything more than necessary about nuclear power stations and nuclear reactors. Because of the urgency, I didn't even have time to



2nd Unit, 1st Battalion, 6th Artillery Regiment
(Koriyama Camp)

Kazuhiko Kikuchi

Experiences of Okuma Town

put on protective clothing. I had been told on the basis of information from the site that there was no cooling water, so water supplies were needed immediately. I was shown to the earthquake-resistant building at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station and, as an SDF unit, took up a position near the entrance, where there was a telephone for contact to the command office at the Koriyama Camp.

Kikuchi: I was in a fire engine. We headed for Fukushima City, where we joined up with a fire engine from the Fukushima Camp. Then 10 of us in three fire engines headed for the nuclear power station. We arrived in the early morning of March 12. When we were driving through the town, people waved to us, and I saw elderly women working in the fields. But when we arrived at the earthquake-resistant building of the nuclear power station, TEPCO asked us to get working right away. We spread out the map of the power station to see which pumps in the facilities could be used. After discussing how the pumps could be connected to the pump vehicle to supply water and so on, we headed for the site. But either the pumps were broken and unusable or the hoses wouldn't reach over the mountain of debris. Eventually, after furious work, we managed to connect a pump to a hose. But then, after reaching over the debris and spraying water for a long time, the hose became damaged too. This process was repeated until eventually we managed to secure a route for pumping water and alternately deployed two pump vehicles there. One deployment lasted for around 60–80 minutes.

Hashimoto: While investigations continued into the most effective way of utilizing the power-supply vehicles, I supported the firefighting personnel and took charge of liaison with the Koriyama command office. SDF personnel heading for the site were given protective clothing, masks, and dosimeters. Because it was so stifling and hot, it was very hard working with those protective clothes and masks on.

Kikuchi: I was supervising the fire engines, but we were working under such unclear conditions, we couldn't tell whether our efforts were having any concrete results or not. It must have been exhausting for our men as they worked so frantically in

such conditions. The same was true for TEPCO. On paper, the structure was like this, so such and such a method should have been okay. But it was n't so. Working in the abnormal environment of radiation, our men were stony-faced, but there was no moaning, no complaining.

Hashimoto: I truly sensed the eagerness of the TEPCO employees to do something and immediately thought, "These are people we can trust." The employees of related companies should really evacuate as well, but they remained, formed huddles to encourage one another, and then made their way to the site.

Kikuchi: On returning from the site, those people lay down on the sofas. When I spoke with them a little, they would say, "We don't have many years left, but we must do our best for the next generation." Hearing those words, I realized again the heavy load of the situation, both physically and mentally. When the Unit 1 reactor exploded on the afternoon of March 12, the SDF pump vehicle was on its way to the site. After I watched it leave from the earthquake-resistant building, there was a huge boom and vertical shaking. When I looked out of the window, there was something fluttering in the air. The pump vehicle returned but then, since its mission had priority, left again. As the main person at the site, I kept wondering what could be done for the men who were here right now.

Hashimoto: After the explosion, to be honest, I was resigned to never being able to return. Even if I were saved and managed to get out, I would most likely be hospitalized. But whatever the circumstances, the only thing for us to do was to remain and carry out our duties. In the evening of March 12, a special chemical unit of the SDF came to replace us, and we left the nuclear power station. I felt so relieved when I entered Funehiki in the city of Tamura and saw lights shining in the houses. I am from Funehiki. After the disaster, the telephone lines were cut, so I had been unable to contact my wife. I went to conduct my duties without letting her know. When I returned and got through to her on the phone, the first thing she said was, "Surely you haven't been at the nuclear power station, have you?" When I answered "Yes," she was so angry. After that, I had to go to my next work, so we didn't actually meet again for six days.

Kikuchi: In my case, before I went, I sent an email saying that I was going. I think it arrived, but when I returned home about a week after the disaster to attend a relative's funeral, my wife was angry as well. "You should at least tell me!" she shouted. For SDF officers, duties must take

priority. If there is an order, naturally you go. Looking back, I think I was whipped up by the prospect of saying "Daddy was there at a historical moment!" As an SDF officer, I am proud to say that I was at the scene right away and was able to execute my duties.

■ Interview Returning to the Place Where Our Family Lived

03



Inhabitants of the Kumagawa district

Norio Kimura

I lost my father, Wataro (then 77), my wife, Miyuki (then 37), and my second daughter, Yuna (then 7), in the Tsunami.

When the earthquake struck, I was working in Tomioka. My boss heard on the radio that the tsunami would be three meters high, so I thought that our house would be okay. I worked for another couple of hours and then went to my home in Kumagawa. But my house wasn't there anymore. I met my mother and elder daughter in the town's gymnasium, which was being used as an evacuation center, and that was the first time I heard the three of them were missing. Even then, though, I didn't think they had been carried away by the tsunami. You only had to walk 50 meters from my house to reach higher land. I was sure they must be at another evacuation center or maybe injured and in hospital, and I went searching for them. But I couldn't find them. I returned to our house. There was rubble scattered around everywhere, however, and in the darkness, I was hardly able to look for them at all.

At 7 in the morning of the following day, March 12, I heard about the evacuation order from our then district head. I can remember him saying, "Let's look after the living first." Those words made me realize that first of all I had to protect our elder daughter, so I followed my mother and elder daughter, who had already left the town with others, to Kawauchi Village. Then the accident

occurred at the nuclear power station. After reporting to the police station in Iwaki that the three of them were missing, we headed for my wife's family home in Okayama Prefecture. We arrived in the early morning of March 16. Leaving my elder daughter there, at around noon of the same day I turned round and headed back to Fukushima alone. If the three of them were still alive, I thought, they wouldn't still be in Okuma. They would be at an evacuation center somewhere. So I went round all the evacuation centers in the prefecture and in neighboring prefectures looking for them.

They found my father at the end of April, in the middle of the paddy field in front of our house. And then in June a DNA test showed that a body discovered near the mouth of the Natsugawa river in Iwaki was my wife. Actually I had seen information about that body before in the police station. It said the body was 145 centimeters in height. My wife was 158 centimeters tall. I hadn't noticed that the information had also said, "Missing lower legs." Still, I was relieved that she had been found.

Some of Yuna's bones were found in Kumagawa in December 2016. Her shoe had been found in the same mountain of debris in the year following the disaster. I imagine that all the time she must have been waving, "Over here! Over here!" If a search had been possible immediately after the disaster, I think there is a strong possibility my father and Yuna would have been found. Six years. People have their own opinions about the nuclear power station. But in view of this long, long time, I am absolutely unable to give my consent.

Some time I want to return again to Kumagawa. Not because it's Okuma, but because that is where we lived as a family. Behind our house I built a statue of Jizo, the guardian of children, for Yuna. When I went there the other day, somebody had

Experiences of Okuma Town

put a scarf around the statue. Others place offerings there. The town is deserted now, so I'm sure

the more people come, the less lonely Yuna feels. I am really thankful that people visit.

■ Interview Changing Life and Memories of Father

04



Inhabitants of the
Ottozawa 1 district

Kuniyuki Sakuma

Our family kept a pear orchard, which was started by my father, Kunimaru. Until retirement I worked in the municipal government and kept the pear orchard going on the side. At the time of the disaster, I was working in the municipal government as a short-term contract employee. The contract was due to end in March, after which I would see to the pear orchard full-time together with my wife. It was just a few weeks before then that the disaster struck.

At that time there were four of us living together, me and my father, wife, and son. By chance, on the day before the disaster my father had gone into a hospital in the city of Fukushima because of an eye problem. In the evening of March 11, seven of us, including my daughter, who was married and living in an adjacent town, and neighbors, climbed into a passenger car and headed west. Although I took along my seal, bank book, and cash card, I thought the evacuation was only a precaution. We intended to return shortly and didn't bother locking the house.

In the city of Fukushima also, electricity was cut off, and my father was moved to a hospital in Aizu-Wakamatsu. We had evacuated to Niigata, and I think it was about 10 days later when we went to see him. He stayed in hospital for about four months. At that time construction work was going on at the hospital, and the building was surrounded by scaffolding. Even in the daytime, the curtains were drawn, making it very gloomy indeed. It was the first time in his life for my father, who had devoted himself to the pear orchard, to be hospitalized, so it must have been very hard for

him. I could see him becoming more and more depressed. Even when a test prior to his discharge revealed a varix the size of a softball in his abdomen, my father wanted to get out. There was no guarantee that the varix wouldn't rupture, and because of his weakened veins, an operation would be risky. But my father said, "I'll place my fate in the hands of providence."

I urged my father to come to Niigata, but he chose to remain in Aizu-Wakamatsu, where he had many acquaintances. My son, who had started working for the evacuated Okuma municipal government in that city, moved into temporary housing with my father and looked after him. It was also my son who found my father when he collapsed in the temporary housing.

I spent the New Year following the disaster with my family in Niigata. After that, my father apparently told my wife over the phone, "You all helped me so much. I really appreciate it. Thank you." It was the first time for my father to express gratitude. About a month later, on January 29, he passed away. He was 83.

My father used to say that he didn't want to die in the temporary housing and told us to look for a home quickly. But he must have understood the situation, because he never said "I want to return." I wanted to show him the state of our house just once, but by the time short visits were permitted a year after the disaster, it was physically impossible for him. I regret it, but there again, maybe it was better for him not to get to see that wasteland.

Our house is on a site scheduled to become a temporary radioactive waste disposal facility. Realizing that we would never be able to return, we decided to build a house in Iwaki. But what a painful choice. Even though we are just about okay economically, my memories of life on that land will not go away. They say that even if the state collapses in a war, the mountains and rivers remain. But the accident at the nuclear power station has

taken away our mountains and rivers as well. Our hometown is gone forever.

We put my father's bones to rest alongside my mother in a grave in Okuma, but we are planning

to move the grave to Iwaki. There I intend to place ornaments of pears which my father cared for whole his life long.

■ Interview Doing What I Can

05



Inhabitants of the
Nogami 1 district

Sumi Ichikawa

At the time of the disaster, I was in the restaurant that I ran. There was so much shaking, it was like the television did not so much fall down as fly through the air. The refrigerator toppled over, and dishes came crashing down from the shelves like an avalanche.

I spent that night at home, amid a power blackout, and the next morning I heard from my son about the evacuation. However, when I went to the community center that was the meeting point for the evacuation, nobody was there. A firefighter told me that everyone had headed off toward Miyakoji, so I got in my car and followed. The road was jam-packed with cars, and Miyakoji was full of evacuees. On the way, I found the school bus of town, and following the bus, I arrived at the Tamura city gymnasium, which was so crowded that there was hardly any room to stand. I received the news about the explosion of the atomic plant reactor while I was there. Everyone was saying "We cannot go back any more" or "What should we do from now?" Some were even crying.

When the municipal government asked for volunteers to help run the evacuation center, I raised my hand. In the mornings and evenings, I went around the center asking if anyone felt unwell. One day, an elderly man fell down suddenly and passed away. This made me realize the importance of my role. At first, I asked people "Do you feel OK?" or "Are you all right? But then the family of a person suffering from depression told me to avoid using the words "OK" or "all right". That made me

realize how very affecting words can be.

We also started cooking vegetables and rice which were sent as relief goods at the gymnasium. When I made some miso soup, a stranger told me how delicious it had been. Yes, in the cold gymnasium, it must have been very welcome. The rhythmic sounds the cooks made as they cut vegetables filled the kitchen and it made me feel happy. But some people seemed to feel uncomfortable with these sounds that were being made to supply hundreds of meals. They felt like the sounds reflected our refugee life.

In April the municipal government moved its base of operations to Aizu-Wakamatsu, and I followed in my own car. But I couldn't help thinking, "Why do I have to come such a long way when I have my own home back in Okuma?" And suddenly tears welled in my eyes. "I'll definitely return!" "Is there no God, no Buddha?" While mouthing these words, I kept on driving---although in the end I soon returned to Tamura to help run the evacuation center there.

Now I am living in temporary housing in Iwaki, where I serve as the head of the residents' association. Recently the number of occupants has decreased a lot. Quite naturally. People are becoming independent again, so it is a matter of joy, not only sadness. While watching over the occupants of the temporary housing in Iwaki as they gain independence, I can't wait for the day when the construction of disaster recovery public housing in the Ogawara district of Okuma is completed. In Okuma, we used to enjoy the plum and cherry blossoms in spring, hydrangea in early summer and red and yellow leaves in autumn. I wish to thank the people who have supported us since the disaster. I will do my best to earn my town back once more.

Experiences of Okuma Town

Interview Passing Our Experiences Down for Generations

06



Inhabitants of the
Ono 2 district

Norio Tazawa

I joined the Okuma municipal government in 1965 and reached retirement age four years before the disaster. Construction of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station of Tokyo Electric Power Co. (TEPCO) commenced in 1967. Before the arrival of the nuclear power station, rice could not be grown very well in this area because of the coastal wind, and many of the townspeople had to go and work elsewhere. When the nuclear power station came, it created jobs, and the number of restaurants and lodgings increased as well. Cooperating companies also came, so it was good for the town's fiscal condition. I was involved in nuclear power administration from the time of soliciting the plant's location in our town and served as president of the prefectural nuclear power public relations association.

On the day of the disaster, because of the power cuts, I did not know anything about the tsunami or the nuclear power station. In the morning of March 12 I heard about the evacuation from a district head. At that time I thought, "Why must the whole town evacuate?" I was proud of the fact that until then Okuma had been operating on the front lines of nuclear power technology, and I thoroughly believed in its safety. Misunderstanding that the evacuation must be a precaution against an earthquake, I thought that we would be returning in two or three days.

After that I moved from relatives' houses in the town of Ono and the village of Iitate to the city of Kanuma in Tochigi Prefecture. Since I had evacuated from Okuma by bus, I had no car. Believing that I would soon return, I had only the clothes I was wearing and no money. I heard that the municipal government was moving to Aizu-Wakamatsu, but I couldn't go there even if I

wanted to. On April 20, before Okuma became a restricted no-go area, I entered the town with a friend just to get my car. My home and the barber's shop that my wife and her family had been operating had been burgled, but my car was okay. I then drove to my secondary evacuation shelter, a guesthouse in Kitakata.

At that guesthouse, after being asked to talk about my earthquake experience to foreign guests there, I became a kind of storyteller. Until then I had avoided talking about myself, because I knew that if I said something like "I was in Okuma" or "I worked for the prefectural nuclear power PR association," the response would most probably be something like "So you're one of them . . ." But then I realized that I must speak out after all. At first I talked about my own experience, but gradually I came to emphasize disaster reduction. First of all, look after yourself. To the elderly, I say look after your medicine notebook, because then during evacuation, even if you don't know the name of the medicine you are taking, if you have your notebook, you can get the medicine. I strongly feel that we must not let the Great East Japan Earthquake and the nuclear power station accident be forgotten and that we must speak about them to future generations.

My main concern now is the elderly folk remaining in temporary housing. Because they received assistance after the disaster, many people tended to become accustomed to relying on others. Going around the temporary housing, I tell people that they must achieve independence as quickly as possible. Our town was poor, but in the past four decades it grew to such an extent that it no longer received local allocation tax grants from the central government. We coexisted and co-prospered along with TEPCO. Now, even though the accident occurred, many people are making efforts toward the decommissioning of the reactors. Friends, townspeople. Seeing that, I think we all should look ahead and get on with our lives.

Interview As Close to Okuma as Possible

07



Inhabitants of the
Ono 1 district

Setsuko Sakae

On March 11, after the disaster had struck, we spent the night in our car in the garden, with the heat turned on. The next morning, we went to the district meeting place, where there were 50–60 people gathered, and we were told to evacuate. Until then I hadn't given a thought to the nuclear power station. At home our things had been scattered about by the earthquake, but anyway I grabbed my husband's medicine, two or three items of underwear, and some sweets and fruit that had fallen on the floor and stuffed them into a bag. On the bus leaving the town, everyone was saying that the evacuation would just be for two or three days and that we would be able to return "maybe tomorrow." It was just like an excursion of local residents, really. There was no sense of tragedy at all.

We moved into the gymnasium in Tamura, and then on March 16 our son, who is living in Tokyo, came to pick us up. I had brought my husband's medicine, but my own medicine had been buried under furniture and was inaccessible. I wasn't feeling very well and in the end became mentally exhausted. Doctors from other prefectures did come to the gymnasium, but they couldn't prescribe any medicine without knowing the name of the illness or drug I was taking. All I received was one sleeping pill.

When we left the gymnasium, a municipal government staff member handed us a piece of paper and told us to write down our names and date of departure. But there was no place to write down where we were going. I imagine the municipal government staff were so busy, they just prepared the forms in haste. In the corner of the small piece of paper, I jotted down my son's address and telephone number. I just wanted the town to know our

whereabouts. Even upon leaving the evacuation center, it was after all the town on which we relied. After that, I frequently phoned the municipal government. It must have been hard for the staff who received my calls to deal with someone who seemed to be in such a state of panic. Rather than asking for something, I was simply full of anxiety and pressed them to tell me what on earth was happening. Looking back, I am aware that I was only thinking about myself.

After moving from my son's home to municipal housing in Yokohama, my husband fell and hurt his leg, requiring hospitalization and outpatient visits. Nevertheless, desiring to get back closer to Okuma, in March 2015 we moved to disaster recovery public housing in Iwaki. Although most of the other occupants were unfamiliar faces, coming from the same town, we soon became friends. At the moment (December 2016) we have temporarily returned to Yokohama so that my husband can have surgery on his leg, but next month we'll go back to Iwaki. I can't wait. I have two calendars on the wall, one for this year and the other showing January of next year, and I keep counting the days remaining. I am sure the other occupants in the Iwaki housing will welcome us back.

Although I think that these six years of hopping from one evacuation place to another have been a miserable experience for us, at the same time I realize that others have had an even harder time. It seems somehow strange, and sad, that we have been driven from our hometown, and our lives away from Okuma have become the norm now.

Experiences of Okuma Town

Interview Tough Evacuation and Memories of Okuma

08



Inhabitants of the
Shimonogami 1 district

Miyako Takeuchi

We spent the night after the disaster in our car. I remember hearing on the car television the order for people living within a radius of three kilometers from the nuclear power station to evacuate “just in case.” Our house was about six kilometers away from the power station, so at that time I didn’t think we would have to evacuate.

In the morning of the next day we were told over the emergency radio system to gather at the district meeting place, so we went there. The windows were broken, preventing entry, so everyone was gathered outside. It was then that I heard the whole town was to evacuate by bus. When I told my parents, who were living at home with us, my father said, “I’m not going.” My father had weak legs. Just as I was thinking that he certainly wouldn’t be able to get on a bus, an acquaintance who operates an elderly care taxi called out to us, and my parents left the town ahead of us, together with another elderly couple. I think it was around 10 in the morning.

Together with my husband, third daughter, and grandchild, I returned to the district meeting place. We waited and waited there, but no bus came to pick us up. The buses that passed were just about all full. We stopped them and let the elderly and children go first. Even after noon, no bus came for us. Then, around 2 in the afternoon, a Self-Defense Forces truck came. There were long seats on both sides of the truck bed, so about 20 of us climbed on board. I suppose about 200 people left the town aboard 10 or so trucks. The truck bed was covered, but nevertheless draughts got in, so it was very cold. One person had a blanket, so we all huddled up and put the blanket over our knees. Every time the truck stopped, we opened the cover and looked out, but it soon got dark, so we had no idea where

we were going. However far we went, every evacuation center was full and unable to accept us. At that time, more than anything else I was worried about my parents, who had evacuated before us.

Eventually, around midnight, we arrived at a spa facility in Koriyama. We were relieved, but then told we would have to undergo a radiation test. We had the test at another place in the town and then, at long last, entered the facility. When I looked at the television, I saw an image of smoke rising from the nuclear power station. My husband was stunned and didn’t move from in front of the TV.

I made contact with my care taxi acquaintance, and on the following day, March 13, he came to pick us up, and we moved to the evacuation center where my parents were. When that center closed on March 14, we went to another. I was concerned about my parents’ health, so on March 17 we moved to Tochigi Prefecture, where my eldest daughter lives. At my eldest daughter’s house, I took a bath for the first time in what seemed like ages. “At least everyone got here safely,” I thought, and the tears just wouldn’t stop running from my eyes. My mother seemed to think that we had been apart for a long time. Until recently she kept saying, “You didn’t come for three whole days . . .” She must have been very worried.

The people in Tochigi have been very kind to us. At present we are living in a house in Kanuma, and little by little we are getting used to life here. But I also want to maintain my ties with Okuma. Last year I took part in Soma-Nagareyamaodori dancing. As long as I can drive the car, I look forward to participating in events and meetings in the town.

Interview Anxiety about Future Leads to Complete Change

09



Inhabitants of the
Kuma 1 district

Hidenori Kitahara

I am now producing strawberries in the city of Chikugo in Fukuoka Prefecture, about 1,400 kilometers away from Okuma. Six years have passed since I came here, but I will never forget the huge earthquake on that day and our evacuation in the gymnasium.

At the time of the disaster, I was working for a company that maintained and repaired the nuclear power station. I was in the basement of the Unit 4 reactor of Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station, carrying out a regular inspection with five colleagues. Immediately after the earthquake, the alarm went off, and power cuts plunged the basement into darkness. Relying on torches, we made our way to the surface. I was worried about a tsunami, but the sea looked quite normal. I couldn’t imagine that moments later a huge tsunami, more than 10 meters high, would come crashing down. After my company instructed us to return home, I went to my house, where my parents, wife, and three children, including our two-month-old daughter, were waiting.

On the following day, March 12, the whole town was ordered to evacuate, and we went to the gymnasium of Iwae Junior High School in Miharu. We had only the clothes we were wearing and nothing to eat, but then farming households in the vicinity came with rice and vegetables for us. Compared with my helpless self, I thought, these farmers are so strong when it comes to protecting life. Albeit it vaguely, I pictured myself leading another life as a farmer.

A few days later I sent my wife and children to my younger brother’s home in Tokyo, and I remained in Okuma to serve as a firefighter. When my assistance no longer seemed necessary, I joined my wife and children in Tokyo, and then we

headed by car to Chikugo in Fukuoka Prefecture, where my sister-in-law lived. After our arrival, I heard that my colleagues had received requests from the company and were returning to the nuclear power station. I wasn’t sure what to do. But about a month after the disaster, I returned to Okuma and joined in restoration work at the nuclear power station. At a place where workers were going around the buildings wearing protective clothing, I myself felt resigned to my fate.

In July, still anxious about the future, I returned to Fukuoka for the first time in three months. Members of the company rugby team to which I had belonged gave me a ball with messages written on it. “Attack!” “Take good care of your family and yourself!” Reading these words of encouragement, I resolved to start a new life in Chikugo, a long way from Fukushima. I also had the feeling that I wanted to create a hometown to which my children could return.

On unfamiliar land, I wanted to have a go at farming. Located in the center of Chikugo Plain, Chikugo is a garden city with lively cultivation of rice, tea, grapes, and pears. Utilizing the emergency job creation program, I began working for a farmer producing the popular Hakata Amao brand of strawberries and learned the basics as an agricultural trainee of Fukuoka Prefecture. I was starting out with no experience, no land, and no farming equipment. But then I was able to rent land, facilities, equipment, and materials from a strawberry farmer who was quitting the business. I also received various support from local people, the local government, and the local JA cooperative. With the cooperation of my whole family, recently I have the feeling that my business has at last got on track.

I don’t want to be a disaster victim forever. Wishing to do something for my hometown, I sent strawberries that I had harvested to children in Okuma. Also, together with my friends in the JA Youth Department, we delivered strawberry ice candies to the elementary school in Aizu-Wakamatsu. I started farming from scratch and still have a lot to learn. But when I saw the

Experiences of Okuma Town

smiling faces of the children on that occasion, I was greatly encouraged.

Interview Longing to Visit the Okuma Seaside Again

10



Inhabitants of the
Shimonogami 3 district

Mariko Ogura

In April 2014 I opened a café in Aizu-Wakamatsu named One's Home, which means one's hometown. My hometown of Okuma was the type of community where, on returning from school, we would shout to the neighbors, "Hi, I'm back!" I wanted to create a place like a hometown where anyone can freely enter and where people have the feeling that they have come back home.

At the time of the disaster, I was in the process of putting together funds in order to open a restaurant. After I had hopped around evacuation centers, my parents, who were worried about the situation at the nuclear power station, recommended me to move out of the prefecture, so about three or four weeks after the disaster I went to the Kansai region, where I had acquaintances. In Fukushima, you could not buy water, and the gasoline stands were not open. Even the rain was scary. But even though I was coming from such a place, the moment I landed at the airport in Kansai, I thought that the air was different. It was just as if nothing had happened. I felt quite out of place in a living environment with no inconveniences whatsoever. I wanted to go back to Fukushima, but I had no house to return to. After that, I moved to Yamagata, and then in the autumn of 2013 I moved into rental housing in Aizu-Wakamatsu with my parents.

In Aizu-Wakamatsu, however, I sensed how difficult it was to tell people about my Okuma background. When anything cropped up, I would say with my parents, "It was better in Okuma" Life in Okuma was far from perfect, but it was a place where you could casually go about your daily business. Coming back, it was the first time for me

to realize just how much we had lost.

The café provided the impetus for me to change my way of thinking. For the first time since the disaster, much to my delight, I felt at home. I was able to tell the people of Aizu-Wakamatsu who visited the café that "I am from Okuma," and they accepted me. The people of Aizu-Wakamatsu are worried about the Okuma residents as well. So when they ask questions, I reply to anything. Some people tell me that their image of Okuma has improved as a result. We ended up being arbitrarily labeled "evacuees" or "acceptors," but basically people are people. If I hadn't changed my outlook, things might have been so different.

Because of the disaster, I lost my hometown, and my uncle in Iwate was swept away by a tsunami. But even more than me, my father was close to my uncle, his elder brother, and he must have had a deep affection for Okuma, where he had lived for several decades and built a house. I also have acquaintances who lost family members and friends. I'm sure there are many people who suffered much more than me.

I lived for a long time with the desire to return to Fukushima, but the fact is that wherever you are, there are people who will share a drink with you. I am thankful for all the encounters that I would not have had if the disaster had not occurred.

I no longer think that I want to return to Okuma. But the town remains an important place for me. And one more thing, I want to see the ocean. Walking along the shore in bare feet, I remember the pebbles being painful and forever stepping on garbage. It certainly wasn't a pretty tourist attraction. But all the same, for me, the sea at Okuma was the sea.

Interview Kind Support and Realization of Dreams

11



Inhabitants of the
Otozawa 3 district

Yuki Kumano
(maiden name Ogawa)

At the time of the disaster I was a second-year student at Iwaki Sakuragaoka Senior High School in the city of Iwaki. On that day, the trains stopped running, so I stayed at school overnight. I knew that I had to be strong because my younger sister was with me, but nevertheless I was full of anxiety about my family's safety.

Around noon of the following day, March 12, I received an email from my mother saying just "We're alive." On the same day my mother and younger brother came in the car to pick us up. My father, who had been away working in Minamisoma, joined us, and the six of us then went to my grandparents' house in Tokyo.

After that, my father, whose work involved nuclear power, soon left to go to the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station. I can remember my mother and me seeing him off at Tokyo Station, with tears in our eyes. My father is a man of few words, but before leaving he stretched out his hand and shook mine. I think there was something he wanted to say.

Later in March my family rented a house in Saitama Prefecture, and we found schools that would accept us. My new school greeted me very warmly. They must have asked graduates to help out, because they provided a school uniform, physical education outfit, and other gear for me so that at the commencement ceremony I was able to wear the same clothes as the other students. Although I had no intention of hiding the fact that I was an evacuee, the other students seemed to know anyway without my telling them. Nobody ridiculed me at all. It was only when a Fukushima friend asked whether I was being bullied that I realized such things might happen.

Still, since it was a new school, I did feel lonely,

and maybe the disaster had been a shock for me. In May I began to be absent from school more frequently. But even then, when I did go to school, rather than ostracizing me, the other students tried hard to speak with me. By June and July, I was enjoying going to school again.

In June, when the first brief visits were permitted and I returned to Okuma, the school treated it as an official holiday, describing it as a part of "social study." Until then, not much information about the town had filtered outside the prefecture. I had been frantically reading postings on the Internet, but I never knew whether they were true or false. I really wanted to see the state of the town with my own eyes. I also, in my own way, investigated radiation levels and decided to go after checking how much extra radiation exposure was tolerable in a year and how much exposure there would be during the brief visit.

When I actually saw Okuma, it was like the scene from a movie. Pitiful. I felt that our town really had died.

At the school graduation ceremony, the other students sang the school song of Iwaki Sakuragaoka Senior High School for me. My classmates had suggested it, and students in other classes with whom I had never even spoken agreed. They had asked for a tape of the song from Iwaki and practiced singing it. I was so happy. So moved.

I am now working as a nurse, which had been my dream. In 2016 I got married, and my surname changed from Ogawa to Kumano, the same kuma as in Okuma. My resident's card has changed, so I am no longer eligible to make brief visits unless accompanying others. But some day I want to show my hometown to my husband. It might be a wasteland, but Okuma is still my hometown.

Experiences of Okuma Town

Interview New Friendship and Experiences through Disaster

12



Inhabitants of the
Kuma 2 district

Keisei Ikeda

At the time of the disaster, I was a first-year junior high school student. On March 11, after a graduation ceremony for third-year students at our school, I had gone to play at a friend's house. We were very shaken by the quake. There were no adults at my friend's house at the time, so the four of us headed for my house, where my mother was.

The next day my mother and I evacuated west in our car, with my mother driving. The first place where we arrived was the gymnasium in the town of Tokiwa in Tamura. But it was full, so we headed for Funehiki Elementary School, where we were accepted. At that time, I didn't realize that something dreadful had happened in our town. Even when we heard on television about the explosion at the nuclear power station and knew that we wouldn't be returning for a while, I wasn't thinking very much about the future and certainly didn't imagine the evacuation would be as protracted as this.

Life at Funehiki Elementary School was inconvenient in some ways, like there was no bath and it was difficult sleeping, but I didn't think it was that hard. Rather, I remember the yakisoba made by the volunteers, which was the first hot meal we had had for ages. It was delicious. Moreover, a volunteer said "You junior high school students must be hungry," and I received a second helping. I remember being so delighted.

After that, we spent a few days at a Denso plant in Funehiki and then headed for Saitama Prefecture, where our relatives lived. On the way, at a gasoline stand in Tochigi Prefecture, on learning that we were evacuating from Fukushima, an attendant told us to come round to the back, where we received gasoline that was really not available then. I was really touched by the kindness.

During our evacuation in Saitama, we heard that

Okuma Junior High School was being reopened in Aizu-Wakamatsu. Since I had not intended to go to a school in Saitama, I was glad that they decided on a reopening of our school so quickly. Immediately after the reopening, there were no textbooks, so we used photocopies in class. I think it was about two weeks later when textbooks arrived and we were able to resume classes properly. At first it was like going to school not so much to study as to meet friends. We had been dispersed, but I was glad to see that everyone was just the same as before. In an unfamiliar environment, school was probably the most soothing place for me.

The time came for me to graduate from Okuma Junior High School. If it had been before the disaster, even if their chosen paths were different, almost all of the students would have been commuting from the town. But as a result of the evacuation, some were staying in Aizu-Wakamatsu, others were returning to the district, and others were moving outside the prefecture. Before becoming so scattered, we wanted to create a lasting memory, so we sent a letter to the singer AI asking her to sing at our graduation ceremony. AI agreed and gave a wonderful performance. It really was an everlasting memory for us.

Ever since my childhood I had dreamed of becoming a seismologist, so I entered the Fukushima College of the National Institute of Technology. Currently I belong to a research group studying the foundations of the land. The disaster did not have only an adverse impact on my life. Indeed, there have also been many positive factors, such as opportunities to meet people and various experiences. I lived in Okuma until the first year of junior high, so I have plenty of memories, and I still love the town. In the future I hope to contribute to the town in some way.

Interview Moving Forward for Reconstruction

13



Inhabitants of the
Koirino district

Mitsuharu Nemoto

I have been the head of the Koirino district in Okuma since the time of the disaster. Part of the district faces the sea. On that day, as I was heading toward the coastal area to warn residents about a tsunami, I suddenly noticed that the tsunami had already flooded the paddy fields by the streams. I was staggered. I immediately moved away and then, when the waves had receded, urged the residents to evacuate to the district community center. That evening, the town instructed us to transfer from the community center to Okuma Junior High School. The nuclear power station did cross my mind, but at that time I thought we would be able to return once the tsunami had abated. "We'll just have to put up with it for one night," I thought. There was no television in the junior high school gymnasium, so I listened to the radio in my car. There was plenty of information about the tsunami, but little was said about the nuclear power station.

The next day the whole town was ordered to evacuate. After all of the district's residents had boarded buses, I went to the municipal government office and helped give instructions to evacuating townspeople. What I would like to emphasize here is that the people of Okuma did not panic at all. Priority was given to the elderly and children. The townspeople followed those instructions and evacuated in a very orderly manner. Everyone got onto the buses with no fuss whatsoever.

The whole Koirino district is now scheduled to become the site of a temporary radioactive waste disposal facility. When the central government began talking about the construction of such facilities back in 2011, the residents were opposed. Around that time, residents entered the town to return to their homes for brief periods. After confirming the high radiation levels in the vicinity of their

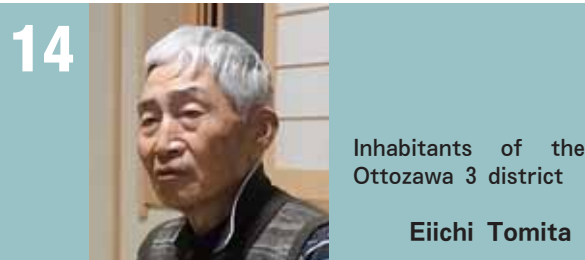
homes, I think they realized that they would not be returning to this place soon. But even so, they did not immediately change their attitude toward accepting the facility. It took two or three years before the residents, including myself, became resigned to the fact that it could not be helped. Eventually, the heads of the seven districts that similarly were candidate sites for the construction of such facilities consulted together and then requested the mayor of Okuma to accept. Unless a final decision was made on whether to accept or not, there could be no way forward for the residents. Their sentiment was one of just wanting a decision one way or the other. There may have been some residents who were opposed. But as the head of the district, I felt keenly that the vast majority just wanted us to make a decision.

It was for the recovery of the town of Okuma that I accepted the construction of a temporary disposal facility. I was abandoning our district so that the town could recover. The place where I had been born, brought up, and lived would be gone forever. It would be a no-go area. Meanwhile, in the Ogawara district, which had become the center of reconstruction, decontamination was carried out, and last year special overnight stays were permitted. I can't express my feelings in words. I mean, decontamination and overnight stays in the Koirino district are absolutely out of the question. It will get left behind and gradually become more and more aloof from the town.

At the very least I want the scheduled sites of temporary radioactive waste disposal facilities to be photographed now, while the townscape there still remains. Our hometown can only exist in memory, but at least I want to see a record of it saved for posterity.

Experiences of Okuma Town

Interview Relinquishment, Conflicts, Mixed Feelings



Inhabitants of the
Ottozawa 3 district

Eiichi Tomita

My house is in Okuma's Ottozawa 3 district, of which I am the head. Of the 98 households in the district, 25 homes are situated in the scheduled site for the construction of a temporary radioactive waste disposal facility. My house lies outside the scheduled area, just 200 meters or so from the border.

For about two or three years after the disaster, I was more than 80% in favor of returning to the town. Regardless of the freedom to conclude a contract or not, I felt pity for the people inside the scheduled disposal site who were going to lose their land and homes. But even now, nearly six years later, radioactive levels in our district have not come down. As the houses and surroundings have gone to ruin, gradually the brief visits have become like going into a strange place. I don't feel as nostalgic as before. Now I don't think I can return. Quite honestly, even without the temporary disposal facility, I wish they would requisition the whole district.

About two years ago we took up residence in Iwaki. When it becomes possible to return to the Ogawara district, which has become the focus of reconstruction, I do feel that I want to go back and live in Okuma. But looking at the Ogawara district now, the activities of companies involved in reactor decommissioning stand out. It is not the Okuma that we knew. So I have mixed feelings. At the very least I want to leave our family grave in the town. We are scheduled to move it from the common cemetery near our house to Ogawara. At the moment, every time we visit the grave, we have to wear protective clothing and masks. It's heart-breaking.

Although I have given up on returning to my house and am ready to abandon it, I don't want to

lose my links with Okuma completely. I feel pity for people in the scheduled disposal facility area, because they have lost the land and houses that they inherited from their ancestors. They have lost their roots. If this sounds contradictory, so be it. But while wanting to apologize to our ancestors for abandoning everything in our generation, I also feel that it can't be helped, because it's the result of the earthquake disaster and the accident at the nuclear power station. Again, my feelings are mixed.

Even now, we hold a meeting of district residents once a year. Last year about 70 people from 50 households attended. Some of them had lived inside the scheduled disposal facility area, others outside. But there were no ill feelings. Indeed, everyone was concerned about one another. Everyone feels pity for everyone else. I told them to think of the temporary disposal facility as a problem of the whole district. After all, district residents are just like one family.

At present my life is not so inconvenient, but my mental state is not the same as before the disaster. When I get up at night, I cannot get off to sleep again. Maybe I am more attached to the town than I thought. I want Okuma to remain as a town. Now that I have given up on my home, the town is testimony to the fact that "I was an Okuma man."

Interview Joining Municipal Government after Post-disaster Help



Inhabitants of the
Shimonogami 3 district

Satoshi Idogawa
(Staff of government office)

I joined the Okuma municipal government in fiscal year 2013. At first I was assigned to the Welfare Section, but since 2016 I have been working in the Health and Care Section.

At the time of the disaster, I was a second-year student at a university in Niigata Prefecture, majoring in chemical system engineering. Upon hearing that my parents, who were living in Okuma, were safe, I felt a little relieved. But I couldn't believe that the town where I had been born and raised had been so badly devastated. Then the whole town was evacuated due to the accident at the nuclear power station. Since my childhood I had been taught that nuclear power stations were safe, so to be honest, even when I saw images of the hydrogen explosions on television, I did not imagine that the evacuation would be so prolonged.

I was worried about my evacuated parents, but at that time I knew that even if I rushed to the evacuation center, I would only be a nuisance, and I sensed that what I could do was limited.

Even before the disaster, I intended to return to Fukushima after graduation. But after the disaster, my desire to do work relating to reconstruction grew stronger. I thought that maybe I could become involved in reconstruction from the outside by finding a job with a company in the prefecture and putting what I had learned at university to use. Or I could join the Okuma municipal government and engage in reconstruction on the inside. I didn't know which path to take. If I was going to join a company, I intended to go on to graduate school and acquire more specialized knowledge. But right now my town was in a terrible state, and I felt eager to provide my services. I also realized that at such a time I should be near my family.

So I joined the Okuma municipal government,

and every program was quite new to me. I spent every day frantically trying to learn the ropes. Sometimes, I wondered if I might not have been a help for the town. Learning the jobs and skills as a town official, I realized the work of a municipal government does not consist only of prominent reconstruction. As an administrative body, whether or not there is a disaster, everyday work is necessary in order to maintain the lives of the town and townspeople. This work constantly piles up requiring attention, alongside any reconstruction efforts undertaken.

I am participating in the Furusato Mirai Kaigi (Future of Our Hometown Council), which was launched in fiscal 2016 mainly by young staff members of the municipal government, to think about Okuma's reconstruction. The contemplation of reconstruction methods and future town building is a boost for one's motivation. When I think about the future of our town, I sense the difficulty of tackling something invisible like radiation. But looking around, there is no other town in the world that has recovered from this state of affairs. The intriguing thing about Okuma is that we can build the best town in the world here. And the challenge is to overcome various issues and obstacles along the way.

Four years have passed since I joined the municipal government. It is thanks to all of the people who went through an unprecedented disaster and nuclear power station accident and still kept our town up to the present that we have a future to fight for. In going about my daily life, I will never forget my feelings of gratitude to my family and others around me.

Experiences of Okuma Town

Interview Devoting Energy to Disaster Area

16



Staff of government office

Junji Kiuchi

I wanted to put my knowledge to use for the reconstruction of the Tohoku region, so when the Reconstruction Agency advertised for judicial scriveners to help in the disaster-stricken area, I raised my hand. I was appointed as a supporting staff member in the Okuma municipal government in November 2014, and then in April 2016 I became a full-fledged municipal government employee working in the reconstruction section at the Iwaki branch.

I was born in Miyagi Prefecture. Though I was raised in Yokohama, from my childhood I spent long holidays at my grandparents' house in Sendai. For that reason, the Great East Japan Earthquake was a shocking event for me. However, I had just passed the state examination for judicial scriveners in November of the previous year. At the time of the disaster I was training as a newcomer to the profession, so I was unable to take part in volunteer activities in the disaster area. After working in the judicial scrivener's office, I became independent. It was a very hectic period, as I was just beginning my career as a judicial scrivener. Nevertheless, somewhere at the bottom of my heart there remained a desire to do something for the disaster area.

Until my dispatch was decided, I didn't know much about Okuma at all. However, the work that I was engaged in was not very different from what I had imagined. I obtained registers of land required for reconstruction from the Legal Affairs Bureau, investigated the landowners, checked whether they were still alive, and, if inheritance was involved, confirmed inheritance relations from family register copies and other documents. There were a lot of difficult cases because, for example, inheritance registration had not been conducted or

a single piece of land was owned by multiple people. In the two years when I was gaining practical experience in the judicial scrivener's office, the work had involved investigating individual inheritance and registering it. In Okuma, however, it was necessary to check all landowners concerned in a project. For this reason, compared with my time in the judicial scrivener's office, the volume of work was much larger, and my own experience relating to inheritance registration increased considerably.

My contract with the Reconstruction Agency was for three years at the longest, and I had intended to return to Yokohama after three years. About half a year after starting to work in Okuma, however, I realized that the time when judicial scriveners would be most needed in Okuma was going to come after the end of my term. I was also concerned by the fact that there were many restrictions on supporting staff dispatched by the central government and it was not possible to work in the same way as municipal government staff. So, desiring to fulfill the role of a judicial scrivener as a municipal government employee, I terminated my contract with the Reconstruction Agency a year ahead of schedule and chose to become a municipal government employee.

I am not thinking far into the future, but as long as I can be useful as a judicial scrivener, I want to continue working as a municipal government employee. I imagine there will be plenty of work to do after the decommissioning of the reactors at Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station advances and the land becomes vacant. In the past, the town of Okuma developed thanks to the arrival of the nuclear power station. But now, because of that station, the town faces difficult times. It has been forced to start again not from zero but from sub-zero. In these circumstances, I want to make efforts and devote myself every day to help with the development of the town, without turning away from reality and always looking forward.

Okuma Town Disaster Chronology

OKUMA TOWN TIME LINE

[2011]

March 11

14 : 46	Great East Japan Earthquake strikes. Automatic shutdown of three reactors (Units 1~3) at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station of Tokyo Electric Power Co. (TEPCO) and four reactors (Units 1~4) at TEPCO's Fukushima Daini Nuclear Power Station
14 : 49	Large tsunami alert
14 : 57	In response to large tsunami alert, tsunami evacuation directive broadcast over the town's disaster-prevention public-address system.
15 : 00	Disaster countermeasures headquarters set up in the second floor lobby of the municipal office building.
15 : 27	First tsunami arrives.
15 : 36	Second tsunami arrives.
15 : 42	TEPCO judges that Article 10 of the Act on Special Measures Concerning Nuclear Emergency Preparedness (complete loss of AC power) applies to reactor Units 1~5 at Fukushima Daiichi.
16 : 04	Residents to east of National Highway No. 6 urged over the public-address system to evacuate to the municipal sports center.
16 : 05	In addition, residents of the Kumamachi and Owaku districts are also urged to evacuate to the municipal sports center.
16 : 30 (about)	Notification received from TEPCO about the application of Article 10 of the Act on Special Measures Concerning Nuclear Emergency Preparedness; municipal government staff dispatched to offsite center.
16 : 36	Emergency core cooling systems fail at Fukushima Daiichi reactor Units 1 and 2; TEPCO judges that Article 15 of the Act on Special Measures Concerning Nuclear Emergency Preparedness applies.
17:00 (about)	Notification received from TEPCO about the application of Article 15 of the Act on Special Measures Concerning Nuclear Emergency Preparedness.
17 : 21	Emergency automatic shutdown of Fukushima Daiichi reactor Units 1~3 announced over the public-address system.
18 : 03	Residents of the Fuzawa 1~3 and Koirino districts urged over the public-address system to evacuate to Okuma Junior High School.
18 : 33	TEPCO judges that Article 10 of the Act on Special Measures Concerning Nuclear Emergency Preparedness (loss of nuclear reactor heat-removal function) applies to Fukushima Daini reactor Units 1, 2, and 4.
19 : 03	The prime minister declares a nuclear state of emergency at Fukushima Daiichi.
20 : 00 (about)	Two liaison staff of TEPCO arrive at the municipal government office.
20 : 50	Fukushima Prefecture orders evacuation within a radius of 2km of Fukushima Daiichi.
21 : 23	The prime minister instructs the prefectural governor and the mayors of Okuma, Futaba, Tomioka, and Namie to order residents within a radius of 3km of Fukushima Daiichi to evacuate and residents within a radius of 3~10km to stay indoors.

	21 : 30 (about)	Residents of Sunlight Okuma instructed to evacuate to the municipal health center; evacuation completed by daybreak.
	23 : 15 (from)	Then head of nuclear power and location at TEPCO visits government office and holds press conference in early hours. Then deputy governor of Fukushima Prefecture visits government office.
March 12	Early hours	Offsite center functions restored.
	05 : 20	Loss of pressure control function at Fukushima Daini reactor Units 1, 2, and 4 (requiring notification under Article 15 of the Act on Special Measures Concerning Nuclear Emergency Preparedness)
	05 : 36	Firefighters and women fire brigades summoned over the public-address system to assemble at the municipal government office.
	05 : 44	The prime minister orders evacuation within a radius of 10km of Fukushima Daiichi.
	06 : 00 (about)	The municipal government by phone to order evacuation within a radius of 10km.
	06 : 09	All residents ordered to evacuate over the public-address system and by public-address cars.
	06 : 30 } 14 : 00 (about)	Evacuation of residents Residents gather at district meeting places and are taken by bus to evacuation centers, starting with those in places near the nuclear power station.
	07 : 45	The prime minister declares a nuclear state of emergency at Fukushima Daini; orders residents within a radius of 3km of the station to evacuate and those within a radius of 3~10km to stay indoors.
	14 : 30	Venting carried out at Fukushima Daiichi Unit 1.
	15 : 36	Hydrogen explosion at Fukushima Daiichi Unit 1 About 10 remaining municipal government staff evacuate from the town.
	16 : 30 (about)	Okuma disaster countermeasures headquarters set up at Tamura municipal gymnasium.
	17 : 39	Residents within a radius of 10km of Fukushima Daini ordered to evacuate.
	18 : 25	Residents within a radius of 20km of Fukushima Daiichi ordered to evacuate. Residents evacuated to the Miyakoji district have to evacuate again, as it lies within the new evacuation zone.
	19 : 04	Start of seawater injection into Fukushima Daiichi reactor Unit 1
	19 : 30 (about)	Meeting of the disaster countermeasures headquarters (in a meeting room on the first floor of the Tamura municipal gymnasium); meets twice a day thereafter.
March 13	09 : 20	Venting carried out at Fukushima Daiichi Unit 3. Morning Reassignment of staff to evacuation centers
March 14	11 : 01	Hydrogen explosion at Fukushima Daiichi Unit 3 reactor
March 15	00 : 01	Venting carried out at Fukushima Daiichi Unit 2 (deemed a failure as pressure in the container does not go down).
	06 : 14	Hydrogen explosion at Fukushima Daiichi Unit 4 reactor
	11 : 00	The prime minister issues an order for residents within a radius of 20~30km of Fukushima Daiichi to stay indoors.
March 17		Start of search for missing persons by the Self-Defense Forces
	09 : 48	The SDF injects seawater into Fukushima Daiichi Unit 3 reactor.

March 21	11 : 30 (about)	The prime minister visits the Tamura municipal gymnasium.
March 22		Departure of participants in study trip to Hinoemata village
March 24		Dispatch to Okuma of prefectural government staff
March 25		The Okuma mayor announces secondary evacuation to Aizu-Wakamatsu.
April 1	10 : 00	Joint ceremony for appointment of municipal elementary and junior high school teachers (Tamura City Chuo Kominkan)
April 3		Start of transfer of residents to Aizu-Wakamatsu (47buses, 1,157persons)
April 4		Transfer of residents to Aizu-Wakamatsu (44buses, 1,018persons)
April 5	09 : 00	Opening ceremony for the Aizu-Wakamatsu branch of the Okuma municipal government; call center also established.
April 16	14 : 00	Entrance ceremony held in Aizu-Wakamatsu for Okuma's kindergarten and elementary and junior high schools.
April 19		Opening ceremony held in Aizu-Wakamatsu for Okuma's kindergarten and elementary and junior high schools.
April 22		The central government designates the area within a radius of 20km of Fukushima Daiichi as a restricted area. The central government lifts the order for residents within a radius of 20~30km of Fukushima Daiichi to stay indoors and also designates a "deliberate evacuation area" and "evacuation-prepared area in case of emergency."
April 25		Remaining evacuation centers in Tamura, Miharu, and Ono brought together in the Work Improvement Center in Tamura.
May 8		Start of temporary entries by businesses for public-interest purposes
May 10		Start of payment of state and prefectural donations
June 1		Reassignment of municipal government staff Publication of municipal newsletter resumed.
June 3		First meeting of Okuma Town Reconstruction Concept Study Committee
June 4		Start of temporary home visits
June 10		Implementation of residents' questionnaire
June 20		Introduction of toll-free expressway passage for evacuees
June 21		Start of admission to temporary housing
June 22		Opening of the Okuma Salon Yukkuri Suppe
July 24		Holding of joint memorial service in the Kumakawa district of Okuma
August 26		Start of temporary home visits in restricted area (within 3-km radius)
September 16		Opening of support facility for the elderly, etc. in Aizu-Wakamatsu

September 22	Start of internal radiation exposure tests
October 11	Opening of municipal government liaison office in Iwaki (in a meeting place in the Yoshima Daiichi temporary housing complex) Opening of group home for elderly people with dementia in Aizu-Wakamatsu
October 31	Compilation of Okuma Town Reconstruction Concept (draft)
November 18	Start of decontamination model project (about 4.5 ha in vicinity of municipal government office)
November 20	Implementation of town's first triple election (for mayor, members of town assembly, and members of prefectural assembly)
December 26	The central government and TEPCO declare that all of the Fukushima Daiichi reactors have achieved a state of cold shutdown.

[2012]

January 17	First meeting of the Okuma Town Reconstruction Plan Study Committee
April 19	Official decision made to decommission four reactors at Fukushima Daiichi.
September 21	Compilation of First Okuma Town Reconstruction Plan
October 1	Reorganization of municipal administration; opening of municipal government liaison office in the Nakadori district of Nihonmatsu
December 6	Start of advance decontamination in the Minamidaira area of the Okawara district in Okuma
December 10	Reclassification of evacuation area in Okuma into a "difficult-to-return zone," "restricted residence zone," and "evacuation order cancellation preparation zone"

[2013]

April 1	Opening of local liaison office of the Okuma municipal government (inside the Sakashita Dam Facility Management Office)
April 8	Opening of Okuma Municipal Junior High School in a prefab building in the grounds of the University of Aizu Junior College Division
May 17	Start of boring survey for temporary disposal facility candidate sites
June 17	Start of special traffic passage in difficult-to-return zone
June 24	Start of full-fledged decontamination work in the evacuation order cancellation preparation zone and restricted residence zone
November 18	Start of work to remove fuel from the spent fuel pool at the Fukushima Daiichi Unit 4 reactor
December 1	Iwaki Liaison Office reorganized into the Iwaki Branch of the Okuma municipal government.
December 14	Official request received from the central government relating to the construction of temporary disposal facilities.

[2014]

January 15	Release of the Interim Report on Okuma Town's Reconstruction Vision (draft)
March 31	Release of the Interim Report on Okuma Town's Reconstruction Vision
May 31	Holding inside and outside the prefecture of explanatory meetings for residents concerning temporary disposal facilities (sponsored by the Ministry of the Environment; 16 times in total; until June 15)
August 30	Fukushima Prefecture announces acceptance of temporary disposal facilities.
September 15	Lifting of restrictions on National Highway No. 6 enables full-length passage for first time in about three and a half years.
September 29	Holding inside and outside the prefecture of explanatory meetings for landowners concerning temporary disposal facilities (sponsored by the Ministry of the Environment; 12 times in total; until October 12)
December 16	Announcement of acceptance of the construction of temporary disposal facilities
December 22	Completion of work to remove fuel from the spent fuel pool at the Fukushima Daiichi Unit 4 reactor

[2015]

February 26	Announcement of acceptance of waste removal to temporary disposal facilities
March 13	Start of waste removal to temporary disposal facilities (storage facilities) by pilot transportation
March 18	Compilation of Second Okuma Town Reconstruction Plan
March 31	Start of operations by TEPCO's meal service center
August 28	Start of advance decontamination in difficult-to-return zone

[2016]

January 27	Completion of solar power generation facility (3.2ha)
August 11	Implementation of first round of special overnight stays (until August 16)
September 7	Construction commences on administrative building of Japan Atomic Energy Agency analysis and research facility.
September 21	Implementation of second round of special overnight stays (until September 25)
November 15	Start of construction of temporary disposal facility (radioactive waste acceptance and sorting facility and soil storage facility)

Okuma, Seven Years After the Disaster

【2017.3.11～▶】



This photograph was taken in halfway to the top of Mt.Higakureyama.