

Introduction

This course reader concerns Japan's "abandoned people" in the wake of the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster of March 11, 2011 in northeast Japan. The term "abandoned people" refers here to groups who have been neglected by both the government and the larger society in which they live. This label can of course be applied to neglected groups throughout history and around the world; some of the authors included here connect the experience of the people harmed by the 2011 disaster to other "abandoned people" in Japan, such as the citizens of Okinawa, victims of mercury poisoning at Minamata, and survivors of the nuclear bombings. In the context of Fukushima, the term highlights the Japanese government's neglect of Japan's rural citizens living near nuclear power plants, for they are exposed to nuclear dangers while Japan's urbanites live in relative safety—although the city dwellers may also be overestimating the extent to which they are safe. Some authors, like Satoko Oka Norimatsu, contend that the mistreatment goes beyond neglect—it is outright discrimination. The "abandoned people" sacrifice much, particularly their safety and perhaps their long-term health, for the sake of others.

The experience of the "abandoned people" of Fukushima is particularly relevant at a time when both Japan and other nations, such as the United States, operate or consider building nuclear power plants. Such projects raise myriad questions. Where should the plants be built? What risks will people living near the plants face? How much oversight should the government have? How much say should local residents have on whether a generator will be built? In the event of a disaster, who should take responsibility? Who should pay for the staggering costs of remediation and can they actually do so, if needed? Moreover, why do governments, corporations, and individuals so often underestimate risks?

Despite the huge risks associated with nuclear power plants, it is not easy to replace nuclear energy. Reliance on imported oil or coal is problematic, and nuclear power proponents in Japan generally doubt that it is possible to build cost-effective renewable sources on a large enough scale to meet even one-third of Japan's energy needs. Conservation efforts would help shrink those needs, but it is not clear by how much. Nevertheless, examining the mistakes made in the past, as the articles in this course reader do, can surely help avoid future disasters.

One of the most important questions that remains unanswered is: When the worst happens, as in Fukushima, how should the government protect its citizens? Given that the responses of the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) and the Japanese national government were and are clearly failures, what can we learn from their mistakes to prevent "abandoning" more people? It is easy to think, "Something like that could never happen in America," but the failures of the U.S. city, state, and national governments after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 do not inspire confidence on this point. And while the response to Hurricane Sandy in 2012 was more effective, the hurricane showed the continued and inescapable vulnerability of the United States to natural disasters. Opponents of nuclear power argue that nuclear power plants intensify the destruction caused by such disasters, and the result is that they will leave larger groups of citizens "abandoned."

The March 2011 Great East Japan earthquake, tsunami, and subsequent Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster brought the plight of Japan's "abandoned people" into sharper focus. Three reactors melted down, contaminating a wide area around the plant with

radiation. This unquestionably endangered rural citizens, as it becomes clear that they were (and probably still are) exposed to levels of radiation that have been associated with cancer and other diseases in the past. Without accurate information, citizens do not know whether to evacuate, and may even distribute contaminated materials—such as crops—to other parts of Japan. In addition, citizens who want to evacuate often cannot afford to because they are not given relocation support.

Following the Fukushima disaster, there is evidence that the national government and TEPCO, which operates the Fukushima Daiichi power plant, deliberately concealed information about radiation levels and other dangers from the public. For example, the Japanese government ordered that residents evacuate their homes only where levels of radiation were twenty times higher than the levels that triggered evacuation following the 1986 Chernobyl disaster, and incorrectly insisted that all lower levels of radiation were perfectly safe. For this reason, many citizens and scientists are accusing the Japanese government of what Aileen Mioko Smith describes as “a strategy of reassurance over one of protection”—that is, the government is more concerned with making sure citizens *feel* safe than making sure they *are* safe.¹ However, empty reassurances to citizens when harm exists is not only extremely dangerous to their health, it also has failed to reassure them; this is why many people think the Japanese government has deliberately “abandoned” the people near Fukushima and other reactors. There is no true investment in their physical or emotional well-being.

Opponents of nuclear power see the abandonment of rural people as fundamental to reliance on nuclear energy itself. Currently, in Japan as in other countries, all nuclear reactors are situated in less-populated areas in order to make it possible to evacuate the people who live nearby should a disaster occur. Opponents of nuclear power criticize this policy on the grounds that it makes not only power companies and their regulators but also Japan's urbanites careless about the welfare of the nuclear power plant's neighbors, their rural compatriots. This situation, in which the people who enjoy the benefits of something are different from those who incur the risks, is what economists call a “moral hazard.” Nuclear power opponents assume that if urbanites were more at risk from nuclear generators, the urbanites would be willing to pay more for alternative energy and try harder to cut their use of energy in all forms.

The botched evacuation policy and ongoing radiation leakage into the air and water around the Fukushima plant is particularly disturbing because it makes it clear that local people were not protected from the disaster, challenging the underlying rationale for putting nuclear plants in rural areas anywhere. And so, many view Fukushima not as an accident but as a failure of both the whole system of nuclear power and government procedures to protect its citizens. The government did not institute tough enough safety regulations to prevent a predictable disaster in earthquake-prone Japan, it did not provide adequate support after the catastrophe, and it is not demanding that TEPCO immediately move the spent fuel rods from the cooling pools at the stricken reactors, even though they are no longer strong enough to withstand another powerful earthquake. The Fukushima disaster demonstrated to the world that the standard safeguards at nuclear power plants today are inadequate to protect citizens from terrible accidents. The authors of these

¹ Aileen Mioko Smith and Mark Selden, “Bringing the Plight of Fukushima Children to the UN, Washington and the World,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 9.41.4, October 10, 2011.

articles agree that the only way to move forward is to phase out nuclear power in Japan and around the world, or at the very least, significantly improve the safety of nuclear power plants.

The authors gathered here explain the "abandoned people" as the result of two parallel domestic relationships in Japan: first, the dynamic between Japan's urban center and rural periphery; and second, the interactions between Japan's national government and local governments. In each of these relationships, the "abandoned people" have very little power, politically or otherwise. Onitsuka, Norimatsu, and Aukema explore Japan's political atmosphere to illustrate this relationship. Next, Thompson explains the difficulties Japanese locals face in coordinating their disaster-relief efforts, even with well-intentioned volunteer organizations. Greene and Busby use data from the 1945 Hiroshima bomb blast and the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster to predict the serious health impacts from the radiation that are likely to develop among "abandoned people" in the years ahead. While other scientists have challenged Busby's assessments, these predictions nonetheless raise important concerns. Finally, George and Yoneyama place the Fukushima disaster in a historical context, drawing comparisons with the contamination of Minamata Bay in the mid-twentieth century, which until 2011 was Japan's most notorious environmental disaster.