

Japan Plans to Expose Its People and 2020 Tokyo Olympians to Fukushima Radiation

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Featured image: Contaminated earth storage area within the Iitate Village evacuated zone, December 2014. Photo: Eric Schultz / EELV Fukushima via Flickr (CC BY-NC-SA).

Former nuclear industry senior vice president Arnie Gunderson, who managed and coordinated projects at 70 US atomic power plants, is appalled at how the Japanese government is handling the Fukushima nuclear crisis.

“The inhumanity of the Japanese government toward the Fukushima disaster refugees is appalling,” Gunderson, a licensed reactor operator with 45 years of nuclear power engineering experience and the author of a bestselling book in Japan about the Fukushima Daiichi disaster, told Truthout.

He explains that both the Japanese government and the atomic power industry are trying to force almost all of the people who evacuated their homes in the wake of the Fukushima nuclear disaster to return “home” before the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.

[This March Japan’s federal government announced](#) the subsidies that have, up until now, been provided to Fukushima evacuees who were mandated to leave their homes are being withdrawn, which will force many of them to return to their contaminated prefecture out of financial necessity.

And it’s not just the Japanese government. The International Olympic Commission is working overtime to normalize the situation as well, even though conditions at Fukushima are anything but normal. The commission even has plans for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics to [have baseball and softball games played at Fukushima](#).

Gunderson believes these developments are happening so that the pro-nuclear Japanese government can claim the Fukushima disaster is “over.” However, he notes,

“The disaster is not ‘over’ and ‘home’ no longer is habitable.”

His analysis of what is happening is simple.

“Big banks and large electric utilities and energy companies are putting profit before public health,” Gunderson added. “Luckily, my two young grandsons live in the US; if their parents lived instead in Fukushima Prefecture [a prefecture is similar to a state in the US], I would tell them to leave and never go back.”

Reports of radiation from the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster, which began when a tsunami generated by Japan's deadly earthquake in 2011 struck the nuclear plant, have been ongoing.

Seven more people who used to live in Fukushima, Japan were diagnosed with thyroid cancer, the government [announced](#) in June. This brings the number of cases of thyroid cancer of those living in the prefecture at the time the disaster began to [at least 152](#).



Arnie Gundersen

While the Japanese government continues to deny any correlation between these cases and the Fukushima disaster, thyroid cancer has long since been known to be caused by radioactive iodine released during nuclear accidents like the one at the Fukushima Daiichi power plant. A World Health Organization report released after the disaster started listed cancer as a possible result of the meltdown, and a 2015 study in the journal [Epidemiology](#) suggested that children exposed to Fukushima radiation were [likely to develop thyroid cancer more frequently](#).

The 2011 disaster left 310 square miles around the plant uninhabitable, and the area's 160,000 residents were evacuated. This April, officials began welcoming some of them back to their homes, but more than half of the evacuees in a nearby town have already said they would not return to their homes even if evacuation orders were lifted, according to a 2016 government survey.

Officials from Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), the company responsible for cleaning up the disaster, announced this February they were having difficulty locating nuclear fuel debris inside one of the reactors. Radiation inside the plant continues to [skyrocket](#) to the point of causing even robots to malfunction.

Cancer cases [continue to crop up among children](#) living in towns near Fukushima.

And it's not as if the danger is decreasing. In fact, it is quite the contrary. Earlier this year, radiation levels at the Fukushima plant were at their [highest levels](#) since the disaster began.

TEPCO said atmospheric readings of 530 sieverts an hour had been recorded in one of the reactors. The previous highest reading was 73 sieverts an hour back in 2012. A single dose of just one Sievert is enough to cause radiation sickness and nausea. Five sieverts would kill half of those exposed within one month, and a dose of 10 sieverts would be fatal to those exposed within weeks.

Dr. Tadahiro Katsuta, an associate professor at Meiji University, Japan, is an official member of the Nuclear Reactor Safety Examination Committee and the Nuclear Fuel Safety Examination Committee of the Nuclear Regulation Authority. Truthout asked him what he was most concerned about regarding the Japanese government's handling of the ongoing nuclear disaster at Fukushima.

"What I regard as the most dangerous, personally, is the fact that the Japanese government has chosen the national prestige and protection of electric power companies over the lives of its own citizens," Katsuta, who wrote the Fukushima update for [the World Nuclear Industry Status Report](#), said.

Gundersen thinks it simply makes no sense to hold the Olympics in Japan.

"Holding the 2020 Olympics in Japan is an effort by the current Japanese government to make these ongoing atomic reactor meltdowns disappear from the public eye," Gundersen said. "I discovered highly radioactive dust on Tokyo street corners in 2016."

According to Gundersen and other nuclear experts Truthout spoke with, the crisis is even worse.

Fukushima and Surrounding Prefectures Radioactively "Contaminated"

"The Japanese government never dedicated enough resources to trying to contain the radiation released by the meltdowns," Gundersen said.

Gundersen said that during his first trip to Japan in 2012, he stated publicly that the cleanup of Fukushima would cost more than a quarter of a trillion dollars, and TEPCO scoffed at his estimate. But now in 2017, TEPCO has reached and announced the same conclusion, but as a result of its inaction in 2011 and 2012, the Pacific Ocean and the beautiful mountain ranges in Fukushima and surrounding prefectures are contaminated.

One of the tactics that Prime Minister Shinzō Abe's administration chose to deploy at Fukushima to contain radiation was an underground "ice wall."

"As the 'ice wall' was being designed, I spoke out that it was doomed to fail, and was [an] incredibly expensive diversion," Gundersen said. "There are techniques that could stop water from entering the basements of the destroyed reactors so that the radioactivity would not migrate through the groundwater to the ocean, but the Japanese government continues to resist pursuing them."

Gundersen argues that Japan could and should build a sarcophagus over all three destroyed reactors and wait 100 years to dismantle them. This way, the radioactive exposure will be minimized for Japanese workers, and ongoing radioactive releases to the environment would be minimized as well.

Gundersen also points out that it is equally important that radioactive water continues to run out of the mountain streams into the Pacific, so a thorough cleanup of the mountain ranges should begin right now, but that is a mammoth undertaking that may never succeed.



IAEA experts depart Unit 4 of TEPCO's Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station on 17 April 2013 as part of a mission to review Japan's plans to decommission the facility. (Source: [Greg Webb / IAEA / Wikimedia Commons](#))

In addition to his other roles, Arnie Gundersen serves as the chief engineer for [Fairewinds Energy Education](#), a Vermont-based nonprofit organization founded by his wife Maggie. Since founding the organization, Maggie Gundersen has provided paralegal and expert witness services for Fairewinds. Like her husband, she's had an inside view of the nuclear industry: She was an engineering assistant in reload core design for the nuclear vendor Combustion Engineering, and she was in charge of PR for a proposed nuclear reactor site in upstate New York.

When Truthout asked her how she felt about the Abe government's response to Fukushima, she said,

"Human health is not a commodity that should be traded for corporate profits or the goals of politicians and those in power as is happening in Japan. The Japanese government is refusing to release accurate health data and is threatening to take away hospital privileges from doctors who diagnose radiation symptoms."

Maggie Gundersen added that her husband also met with a doctor who lost his clinic because he was diagnosing people with radiation sickness, instead of complying with the government's story that their illnesses were due to the psychological stress of the Fukushima Daiichi meltdowns.

M.V. Ramana is the [Simons Chair in Disarmament, Global and Human Security at the Liu Institute for Global Issues](#) at the University of British Columbia in Canada, and is also a [contributing author to the World Nuclear Industry Status Report](#) for 2016. Like the

Gundersens, he is critical of the Abe administration's mishandling of Fukushima.

"I am not sure we can expect much better from the Abe administration that has shown so little regard for people's welfare in general and has supported the nuclear industry in the face of clear and widespread opposition," Ramana told Truthout. "As with restarting nuclear power plants, one reason for this decision seems to be to reduce the liability of the nuclear industry, TEPCO in this case. It is also a way for the Abe administration to shore up Japan's image, as a desirable destination for the Olympics and more generally."

Katsuta agreed.

"Prime Minister Abe has neither the knowledge about the issue of Fukushima accident nor the interest at all," Katsuta said. "The Abe administration has yet to clearly apologize for its responsibility for promoting the nuclear energy policy."

Instead, according to Katsuta, the Abe administration has lifted evacuation orders in an effort to "erase the memories of the accident."

Fukushima Evacuees "Forced" Back Home

In the immediate wake of the Fukushima Daiichi meltdowns, 160,000 people fled areas around the plant. The Abe government has been providing housing subsidies to those who were evacuated, but its recent announcement means those subsidies [will no longer be provided](#). Many "voluntary evacuees" will be forced to consider returning despite [lingering concerns over radiation](#).

"This is very unfortunate," Ramana said of the withdrawal of the subsidies. "The people who were evacuated from Fukushima have already been through a lot and for some of them to be told that the government, and presumably TEPCO, does not have any more liability for their plight seems quite callous."

He explains that, in enacting this callous move, the Japanese government is claiming that radiation exposure is now within "safe levels" for people to return home. This claim ignores the fact that levels now are even higher than before the accident, and also disregards the widespread uncertainties plaguing the measurement of radiation in the affected areas.

Katsuta expressed similar concerns.

"The lifted evacuation area has not been restored completely, as the radiation dose is still high, and decontamination of the forest is excluded," he said. "Besides, the decontamination waste is often stored in the neighborhood, and there were many families who did not return, and then the local community collapsed."

Katsuta added that the subsidies only amount to \$1,000 per refugee, so paying them for the next 10 years is "not expensive" in order to safeguard human lives.

Given her work in PR for the nuclear industry, Maggie Gundersen had an interesting position

on the Abe government's tactics.

When she was working for the atomic power industry, she was "carefully taught" certain misinformation about atomic power reactors by industry scientists and engineers. She said she would never have done that work if she had known the "hidden truth." She and Arnie were both taught that atomic power was the "peaceful use of the atom" — she does not support war and believes that the use of atomic weapons or depleted uranium are horrific crimes — and she explains that she never would have worked for or promoted atomic power knowing what she knows now.

"Arnie and I immediately noticed that TEPCO and the Japanese government were using the same playbook that was used at Chernobyl and Three Mile Island (and for that matter, Deepwater Horizon)," Maggie Gundersen explained. "Governments immediately minimize the amount of radiation being released, or in the case of Deepwater Horizon, the amount of oil."

She added that in each of these cases, the mainstream press dutifully reported shortly after the crisis that there was nothing to fear, even though there was no evidence to support these assertions. The governments' objectives were to minimize fear and chaos, and most media simply echoed officials' claims. The responses to the Fukushima disaster are following the same pattern.

"Is the Abe regime glossing over the seriousness of the Fukushima meltdowns and ongoing radioactivity? Absolutely," she said. "What is happening in Japan to the known and unknown victims is a human rights violation and an environmental justice debacle."

2020 Tokyo Olympics to Be Held Amidst "Hot Particles"

Katsuta said that the Fukushima evacuees are "extremely worried" that their plight will be overshadowed by the Olympics. He believes the Japanese government is using the Olympics to demonstrate to the world that Japan is now a "safe" country and that the Fukushima disaster "has been solved."

"In Japan, the people are really forgetting the Fukushima accident as ... the news of the Olympics increases," he said.

Arnie Gundersen doesn't think it makes sense to have some of the Olympic venues (soccer, baseball and possibly surfing) in Fukushima Prefecture itself.

"Radioactively 'hot particles' are everywhere in Fukushima Prefecture and in some of the adjacent prefectures as well," he said. "These 'hot particles' present a long-term health risk to the citizens who live there and the athletes who will visit."

Ramana, too, believes that the events held closer to Fukushima "may be adding to the radiation dose of the competitors and the spectators."

Fukushima Disaster "Will Continue for More Than 100 Years"

Maggie Gundersen pointed out that the Nuclear Regulatory Commission consistently claims it has learned lessons from Fukushima, but she doesn't think the commission — or the Japanese government, or corporations — learned any lessons at all.

“Energy production is all about money,” she said. “After the meltdowns, many banks in Japan invested in keeping the atomic power reactors on hold until the disaster could sort itself out. Those banks and the government supporting its access to the use of the atom have a vested interest in starting the old reactors up.”

Katsuta has a dire outlook for the future of Fukushima, and said there are already numerous evacuees who have given up hope of returning because they are aware of the crisis being unsolvable by the current means of TEPCO and the Abe administration.

“Even if decontamination and decommissioning work progresses, the problem will not be solved,” he said. “We have not yet decided how to dispose of decontamination waste and decommissioning waste.”

Ramana believes Fukushima should be a reminder of the inherent hazards associated with nuclear power, and how those hazards become worse when entities that control these technologies put profits over human wellbeing.

Arnie Gundersen had even stronger words.

“The disaster at Fukushima Daiichi will continue for more than 100 years,” he explained. “Other atomic power reactor disasters are bound to occur. Chernobyl and Fukushima Daiichi should have taught everyone around the world that nuclear power is a technology that can destroy the fabric of a society overnight.”

According to him, the remains of the reactor containments at Units 1, 2 and 3 are highly susceptible to damage from another severe earthquake, and any earthquake of 7.0 or higher at the Fukushima site could provoke further severe radiation releases.



Shortly after the meltdowns, Maggie and Arnie Gundersen both spoke about Japan being at a “tipping point”: It could respond to the disaster by leading the world in renewable energy while choosing to protect people and the pristine rural environment through sustainable energy economies.

But obviously it didn't work out that way.

“The world saw Japan as technologically savvy, but instead of moving ahead and creating a new worldwide economy, it continues with an old tired 20th century paradigm of energy production,” Maggie Gundersen said. “Look at the huge success and progress of solar and wind in other countries like Germany, Nicaragua and Denmark. Why not go energy independent, creating a strong economy, producing many more jobs and protecting the environment?”

Arnie Gundersen has plans to return to Japan later this year on a crowdsourced trip with scientific colleagues in order to teach Japanese citizen scientists how to take additional radioactive samples. [Fairewinds Energy Education](#) is currently fundraising to make this possible.

In the meantime, dramatic examples of the ongoing dangers of nuclear power in Japan abound.

In June, [radioactive materials were found in the urine](#) of five workers exposed to radiation in an accident at a nuclear research facility in Japan’s Ibaraki Prefecture. In that incident, one of the workers had a [large amount of plutonium in his lungs](#).

Recent polls in Japan show that the Japanese public has [lost faith](#) in nuclear safety regulation, and a majority of them favor phasing out nuclear power altogether.

Meanwhile in the US, President Donald Trump has [put nuclear energy first](#) on the country’s energy agenda and has announced a comprehensive study of the US nuclear energy industry. Trump’s energy secretary [Rick Perry said](#),

“We want to make nuclear cool again.”

Dahr Jamail, a Truthout staff reporter, is the author of [The Will to Resist: Soldiers Who Refuse to Fight in Iraq and Afghanistan](#) (Haymarket Books, 2009), and [Beyond the Green Zone: Dispatches From an Unembedded Journalist in Occupied Iraq](#) (Haymarket Books, 2007). Jamail reported from Iraq for more than a year, as well as from Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Turkey over the last 10 years, and has won the Martha Gellhorn Award for Investigative Journalism, among other awards.

His third book, [The Mass Destruction of Iraq: Why It Is Happening, and Who Is Responsible](#), co-written with [William Rivers Pitt](#), is available now on Amazon.

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