

“Normalizing” Nuclear Catastrophe: Japan’s Abe Government Risks Fukushima Victims’ Lives with “Forced Return” to Contaminated Areas

By [Kendra Ulrich](#)

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A massive decontamination exercise is under way in Iitate Village near Fukushima, writes Kendra Ulrich: step one in a plan to force 6,000 residents back into the evacuated zone in 2017. But as radiation levels remain stubbornly high, it looks like the real plan is to ‘normalize’ nuclear catastrophe, while making Iitate residents nuclear victims twice over – and this time, it’s deliberate.

The worst nuclear disaster in a generation at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant – which began in March 2011 – is still very much an ongoing crisis that will not be solved for the many many decades.

Most of the massive radioactive releases were carried out to the Pacific Ocean by the prevailing winds at that time of year. But, on the nights of 15th and 16th March, the winds turned, carrying an enormous amount of radiation inland. Fukushima prefecture, especially to the northwest of the crippled reactor site, was heavily contaminated.



The Japanese government is undertaking decontamination efforts with the intention of lifting evacuation orders by March 2017.

But Greenpeace investigations have made a shocking discovery: in Iitate – one of the priority targets of the Abe Government’s plan – radiation dose levels are comparable to those inside the 30km exclusion zone around Chernobyl. Even more surprising, this was true even around homes that had already been supposedly ‘decontaminated’.

What on earth would motivate the Japanese Government to do such a thing to the tens of thousands of nuclear victims and decontamination workers?

Decontaminating Iitate – the 200 sq.km ‘village’

To answer that question, it is first important to understand a bit of background on ‘Iitate Village’. It is actually a 200 sq.km area of heavily forested hills, mountains, and lakes, interspersed with farm fields, and homes. It lies 28 – 47 km to the northwest of the destroyed Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, in the direct path of the heaviest on-land radioactive fallout.

Although the Abe Government has stated on its website that it is “decontaminating” Iitate – even going so far as to say on the Ministry of Environment website that 100% of the forest has already been decontaminated – you have to dig through several different pages to discover that they are only referring to about a quarter of the land area of Iitate.

In other words, of the 200 sq.km of Iitate Village only 56 sq.km are targeted for decontamination. Of that fraction, most of the focus has been on fields, 10-20 m strips of

forest either side of public roads, and in the small immediate area around people's houses.

Even the limited amount of targeted forest isn't finished and will continue for at least another year or longer.

And what strikes you when you see it is not just the swarms of workers raking away at the woodland floor and trimming blades of grasses by hand in these first 10-20m of forest along the roads, but the extent of the vast mountains upon mountains of dense, lush forest stretching out behind them as far as the eye can see.

You feel sorry for them. You also admire their intensive effort, meticulous work, and commitment. They are working in sweltering heat, in protective clothing, boots, gloves, masks and goggles; not even their eyes are visible. And they are doing intense physical labor for almost no impact.

Many of these workers are the residents of other impacted areas, like Minamisoma, who lost their jobs in farming, forestry, fishing or services due to the nuclear disaster. So many are working on their former home areas which are now heavily contaminated with radioactivity.

It's surreal. And it's heartbreaking

On March 27th 2011, Greenpeace radiation investigations in Iitate had revealed extremely high levels of contamination, which led our organisation to [urgently recommend to the Japanese government the immediate evacuation of the more than 6,000 residents](#).

Until that point, the residents of Iitate had been told that evacuation was not required. Evacuation did not begin until April 22. And still, eight weeks after the start of the accident, in early June, over 1,200 people remained in Iitate. As a result, the people of Iitate were the most exposed to radiation of all citizens of Fukushima prefecture.

Iitate has since become an iconic area within the story of Fukushima: a constant reminder to the Japanese public and the international community that a major nuclear disaster is not confined to a small 'emergency planning' zone around the reactor site. The impacts are far reaching, destroy entire regions and communities, rip people from the fabric of their lives, and cannot be repaired.

Over four years after the triple reactor core meltdowns and exploded containment buildings at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, the majority of the Japanese public has remained opposed to any nuclear restart. The country has been completely nuclear-free for nearly two years, thanks in large part to significant public opposition, in spite of the massive pressure from nuclear utilities and the Abe government on local city governments.

However, these utilities are massively powerful and the Abe government is wholly in bed with them.

'Normalizing' nuclear catastrophe

In an effort to reduce public opposition, Abe has been pushing forward the pro-nuclear agenda to 'normalize' nuclear disaster.

If the public can be convinced that less than five years after the worst nuclear disaster in a generation, citizens can go home and return to life the way it was before the disaster - with

no additional health risks – then that is a powerful argument against the majority of Japanese citizens who oppose nuclear reactor restarts.

The effort to minimize the impact of the disaster on the nuclear industry has been aided by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), an agency charged with the promotion of nuclear energy in its charter.

The IAEA has sought to downplay the radiological risks to the population since the early days in 2011. In fact, it produced two documents that can be said to have laid the foundation and justification for Abe's current policy of *de facto* forced resettlement.

The reality is this myth making requires that the people of Fukushima prefecture – especially the people of Iitate – be the sacrificial lambs for the nuclear industry. This is not only wholly unjust, but is a violation of their human rights.

They have already been exposed to more radiation than any other population in the region. To deliberately force the people of Iitate, especially women and children, back to areas where dose rates reach up to 20 millisieverts per year puts them at significant, unacceptable, and unnecessary risk.

A deliberate plan that will have terrible consequences

After all, this is not the confusion that ensues after a nuclear disaster. This is a thought-out plan of forcing people back into their heavily contaminated former homes, no matter what the cost – both in wasteful, ineffective decontamination of these areas and in human health risks.

Compounding the gross injustice of the Abe Government's forced resettlement policy, by focusing on creating a myth of a return to normalcy – and therefore investing vast amounts in expensive and futile decontamination – it is therefore utterly neglecting the contaminated areas that were never evacuated.

Rather than addressing this urgent need to reduce the radiation risks to these populations, whom are currently living in contaminated areas, the government is more interested in deceiving the public in Japan and globally by creating illusions in places like Iitate.

What is clear is that the damage done to the people of Fukushima prefecture, and especially Iitate, is irreversible and irreparable. Their entire communities and way of life were destroyed by the nuclear disaster at Fukushima Daiichi, with no prospect for a safe return in the foreseeable future.

At minimum, we as Greenpeace, demand:

1. No lifting of the evacuation order in Iitate;
2. Exemptions and Government support for those determined to return after having full and accurate information regarding the risks; and,
3. Full compensation for their loss of livelihood, property, community, mental distress, and health risks incurred, so that they may fully support themselves to move forward to pursue whatever life they so choose.

To keep the victims of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster in limbo, many crammed into tiny temporary housing cubicles, for nearly five years is inhumane. To force these citizens

back into such heavily contaminated areas via the economic leverage the Government holds over them is a gross iniquity.

And for the International Atomic Energy Agency to assist the Japanese Government in the propaganda war being waged on Fukushima victims not only undermines whatever credibility it may have, but amounts to it being an accomplice in a crime against the people of Japan.

Kendra Ulrich is Senior Global Energy Campaigner for Greenpeace Japan.

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