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FROM THE
DIRECTOR OF
THE JOY LUCK CLUB

April 2, 2011

Japan's Nuclear Disaster Severs Town's Economic Lifeline, Setting Evacuees Adrift

By **HIROKO TABUCHI**

KAZO, Japan — Along with 1,300 other evacuees from a town two miles from Japan's damaged nuclear plants, Kunikazu Takahashi and his elderly mother are crowded into an abandoned high school here, sleeping on donated tatami mats as they ask themselves whether it will ever be safe to return.

But Mr. Takahashi, 47, feels he has no choice: to earn enough to support his mother, he needs to go back to his job as a technician at the Fukushima Daini nuclear plant, just six miles from the Daiichi plant, which is spewing radioactive particles.

"They called several days ago, asking for me," Mr. Takahashi said. "I have to go back." He shrugged off a question about the dangers; in Fukushima's stagnant economy, he said, he was lucky to have a job at all. "I try not to think about it," he said.

That desperation speaks volumes about the hard choices residents of some of Japan's most remote communities have made in a country where postwar economic growth has been concentrated in big cities.

Four years ago, Shiro Izawa and his fellow town council members championed a plan to build two new reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, a welcome addition of jobs and capital to the otherwise sleepy town of Futaba.

Now, he, too, is a refugee, driven from his home by the very plant he long held up as the linchpin of the local economy.

"The plant was supposed to be safe," Mr. Izawa said at the shelter just outside Tokyo, 150 miles from Fukushima. "That was the promise. We had no industry in Futaba. To flourish, Futaba needed the plant."

Now town officials are consumed with the evacuation of Futaba's 6,900 residents, shepherding a group of about 1,300 people from one makeshift sleeping place to the next. It is a tragic tale of an entire community evacuated in the wake of the world's largest nuclear disaster since Chernobyl.

On Thursday, they arrived at the large abandoned high school offered to them in Kazo. Weary and laden with bags, they walked quietly to their assigned rooms: 45 people in the music room, 40 people in the computer lab, 70 in the library.

Some within the group had complained that they had hoped to remain closer to Fukushima, and some Futaba residents remain scattered at evacuation centers there.

But Katsutaka Idogawa, the town's mayor, argued that Futaba's residents should stay together. There was no place big enough to house the entire group in Fukushima, and a sports stadium that had offered them temporary lodging was reopening for a series of concerts, forcing them to leave.

"The important thing is that we stay together as one," Mayor Idogawa said. "It helps us help you. It helps us make sure everybody is all right."

Much of the growth outside Japan's cities has come from giant public works projects, or in the case of Futaba, a nuclear complex it readily agreed to host in the 1960s.

Now there is soul-searching among Futaba's refugees. Many at the shelter still speak of the plant's importance to the town, and about how it helped buoy the fortunes of a once declining town.

But there is also frustration directed at the Tokyo Electric Power Company, the plant's operator, over its handling of the crisis, as well as a sense of injustice; the power Tokyo Electric generated at Fukushima supplied the capital, not local homes and businesses.

Futaba was once a backwater reeling from coal mining's postwar decline, and a source of migrant workers for Tokyo, so Futaba's leaders responded enthusiastically to inquiries from Tokyo Electric in 1960 over a possible nuclear plant in the area.

The following year, the Futaba town council, together with a neighboring town, Okuma, voted unanimously to invite Tokyo Electric to build a nuclear plant on a 900-acre tract of farmland, according to Fukushima prefectural records.

As Fukushima Daiichi's six reactors came online through the 1970s, Futaba's fortunes also brightened. By the end of that decade, the plant employed thousands of workers, and the

town's population grew from less than 7,000 to a peak of almost 9,000. Futaba's success prompted two neighboring towns to court Tokyo Electric for another nuclear plant in the area; in 1975, work began on the Fukushima Daini nuclear plant, where Mr. Takahashi has worked for 15 years.

More important to local politicians, Futaba received substantial subsidies from the national government, as well as property tax receipts from Tokyo Electric. By 2008, the subsidies alone added 13 billion yen (\$157 million) to Futaba's finances, according to town statements. But Futaba poured the money into extensive public works projects — an elderly care center, a sports park, a revamped sewage system — and eventually accumulated a debt of almost 10 billion yen, or \$121 million.

A new town council elected in 2007, including Mr. Izawa and Mr. Idogawa, the current mayor, pledged to reduce that debt by slashing costs and public works spending. The town again turned to Tokyo Electric, approving a plan to build two new reactors at Fukushima Daiichi, which had been halted after a cover-up scandal at the plant. The approval immediately qualified Futaba for new subsidies; in the fiscal year that ended in March 2010, Futaba received about \$45 million from the government, or 60 percent of its total revenue. "I feel a sense of relief," Mayor Idogawa told local reporters at the time.

That relief has turned to anguish as evacuees wonder whether they can ever go home.

Yoshie Hayashi, a 43-year-old mother of two, still speaks wistfully of the family's last breakfast in her home about six miles from the plant: grilled fish, miso soup and rice. The evacuation order came part way through the meal; she rolled the remaining rice into rice balls to take for the road. The family was unable to take much else.

"We thought we'd only be gone a little while," Mrs. Hayashi said, stretching her legs in the high school grounds. Her daughter, Ekuko, 17, said, "I should have brought my spring clothes."

Mrs. Hayashi said she was especially irritated by Mayor Idogawa's decision to take the group so far from Fukushima. Ekuko was just about to start her senior year of high school; Mrs. Hayashi is terrified that she may not finish school, a big disadvantage in a society that reveres education.

Moreover, Mrs. Hayashi said, she and her husband must find new jobs after leaving their old ones behind. Her husband, an engineer for a telephone company, hopes to find work in Tokyo, but Mrs. Hayashi, a poultry farm worker, has "no city skills," he said. She plans to seek a temporary job as a janitor.

“We won’t stay here,” Mrs. Hayashi said, before walking back to their temporary abode in a teachers’ room. “We want to return to Futaba. Our hometown happens to have a nuclear plant. But it is still our home.”