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Japanese Revisit Nuclear Zone While They Can

By **ANDREW POLLACK**

OKUMA, Japan — Residents who lived near the damaged Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant flocked to the area on Thursday ahead of a midnight evacuation deadline imposed by the government.

While they were greeted by the buckling roads and collapsed houses familiar to many Japanese in the wake of the earthquake and tsunami that wrought such destruction here on March 11, they faced the added burden that dangerous radiation levels from the Daiichi plant might mean they were saying goodbye to their homes for months or years. Some worried they would never return.

In Okuma and nearby towns inside the 12-mile zone around the plant declared off limits by the government, those who returned encountered a ghost town where traffic lights did not function and abandoned dogs lolled in the empty streets.

At a family farm in nearby Tomioka, cows had the run of the place, eating the lettuce in the garden and roaming through the front yard. At a farm in Namie, the scene was grisly: about 40 cows, chained to their posts, lay dead, side by side, in two adjacent barns. Another dead cow was sprawled across the road, blood oozing from its mouth. A few live cows sat serenely nearby, as if nothing had happened.

In Futaba, a town next to the plant, several signs stretching across the empty streets extolled the virtues of atomic energy. "Nuclear power is energy for a brighter future," read one. Another said, "The correct understanding of nuclear power leads to a better life."

And at the gate of the Fukushima Daiichi plant itself, workers in white suits and masks turned away an unauthorized car while photographing its license plate. On a board behind the workers someone had written, "Don't give up."

The crippled reactors themselves, and the undoubtedly frenzied work going on there, were obscured by hills, some with cherry trees in full blossom.

While the government ordered an evacuation of the area shortly after the nuclear emergency began, it has not enforced the edict until now, and residents have been slipping back into the zone to retrieve their belongings.

Radiation levels around the plant have fallen sharply since the days just after the accident, clearing the way for returnees. A reporter who roamed through various parts of the evacuation zone for five hours on Thursday had a total exposure of about 50 microsieverts, about the same as one would experience on a round-trip flight between New York and Los Angeles.

With the government now enforcing the evacuation order, there is the question of whether those who have ignored it until now will leave. The government says 78,200 people lived within the 12-mile radius of the plant before the earthquake. A police spokesman in Fukushima Prefecture, where the plant is located, said spot checks on 3,378 addresses in the past three weeks found people at 63 of them.

An additional 62,400 people live 12 to 18 miles from the plant. They were urged to evacuate or to remain indoors.

Tadanori and Eiko Watanabe, who live in that outer zone, about 17 miles from the power plant, have done neither. While worried about radiation, they refused to abandon their 16 beef cows. "Our cows are like our family, and we can't leave them here," said Ms. Watanabe, as she and her husband carted away manure in wheelbarrows.

Most of their neighbors have long since left, and their houses are dark. "Especially at night it's scary," Ms. Watanabe said, adding that she and her husband passed the time watching television. Ms. Watanabe said that if she were ordered to evacuate, rather than just urged to do so, she would obey. "We're looking for a place we can go with the cows," she said.

Kiyoshi Abe, a farmer in Minamisoma who lives about eight miles from the nuclear plant, said he was the only one in his neighborhood not to evacuate. "I'm amazed the Japanese are so obedient," he said by telephone.

But Mr. Abe, who is 83, said that at his age, "I don't care about a little bit of radiation." He also has [cancer](#), which he said might worsen if he had to move.

Mr. Abe and his 81-year-old wife had stockpiled huge bags of rice and other food. "I had a refrigerator and freezer full of foods and was confident I could stay here with no problem for a year or two," he said.

But on March 26, he said, the power went out, and the electric company would not send a repairman into the evacuation zone. "So we spent nights with a candle and had to throw away much of the food," he said. His wife, he said, was becoming exhausted.

So now, with evacuation mandatory, Mr. Abe will become one of the obedient Japanese. He said he would be driving out on Saturday.

On Thursday, the government said it would arrange bus trips in which one member of each household could return home for two hours, though homes within three kilometers, or nearly two miles, of the plant would be off limits.

But many people hoped to retrieve more by returning by car with family members. That led to some incongruous traffic for a supposedly deserted area. At one point, a line of 10 cars was seen streaming into the zone on the main road from the west. There were some police roadblocks, but people could talk their way around them.

Wearing a mask, a raincoat, rubber gloves and plastic shopping bags tied around her feet, Michiko Koyama returned to the home in Okuma where she was born and had lived for all of her 50 years.

She had left in a hurry, evacuated by Japanese soldiers a day after the earthquake and tsunami. Dirty dishes from a makeshift meal, prepared after running water and electricity had been knocked out, were still sitting on the table.

Now she was coming home to retrieve financial documents, photo albums and whatever other prized possessions she could fit into the small hotel room where she is staying with her two children and other family members.

"It feels like my house is burning down, so I want to take as much as possible," she said. "I don't know how many years it will be before we can come back."

Ken Ijichi contributed reporting from Okuma, Japan, and Yasuko Kamiizumi from Tokyo.