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Angry Parents in Japan Confront Government Over Radiation Levels

By **HIROKO TABUCHI**

FUKUSHIMA CITY, Japan — The accusations flew on Wednesday at the local school board meeting, packed with parents worried and angry about radiation levels in this city at the heart of Japan's nuclear crisis.

"Do you really care about our children's health?" one parent shouted. "Why have you acted so late?" said another. Among other concerns: isn't radiation still raining down on Fukushima? Shouldn't the entire school building be decontaminated? The entire city? Can we trust you?

"We are doing all we can," pleaded Tomio Watanabe, a senior official of Fukushima's education board.

A huge outcry is erupting in Fukushima over what parents say is a blatant government failure to protect their children from dangerous levels of radiation. The issue has prompted unusually direct confrontations in this conflict-averse society, and has quickly become a focal point for anger over Japan's handling of the accident at the nearby Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, ravaged in the March 11 earthquake and tsunami.

At issue are updated government guidelines that allow schoolchildren to be exposed to radiation doses that are more than 20 times the previously permissible levels. That dose is equal to the international standard for adult nuclear power plant workers.

Adding to the anxiety, there is little scientific knowledge of the sorts of radiation dangers that Japan may now be facing. Scientists say readings in most areas are too low to cause immediate illness — even among children, who are more vulnerable — but they have a limited understanding of how low radiation doses over a long period of time can affect health.

“People in Japan want a simple answer: Is it safe or is it dangerous?” said Kuniko Tanioka, a member of Parliament’s upper house, on a recent visit to Washington. But given the state of radiation science, “there is no such thing” as a simple answer, Ms. Tanioka said.

For two months, the children at the Soramame Children’s House, a day care center about 37 miles from the stricken plant, spent their days indoors, windows sealed shut to keep out radiation, their favorite buckets and spades contaminated and strictly off limits.

But when the local authorities made no effort to decontaminate the area, caregivers took matters into their own hands. On the advice of local environmental groups — they said local officials had none to give — a group of parents and teachers donned makeshift protective suits and masks, took up spades and disposed of the playground’s topsoil.

After the topsoil removal, radioactive materials, which tend to be deposited in the soil, fell from about 30 times the levels naturally found in the environment to twice those levels.

“It breaks my heart that they did nothing for the children,” said Sadako Monma, herself a mother of two, who has run the Soramame center for 15 years. “Our answer was to stop waiting for someone to help us.”

On Monday, a group of angry parents from Fukushima staged a rowdy protest outside Japan’s Education Ministry in Tokyo, bearing signs reading “Save our children” and demanding to speak with the minister. They were rebuffed.

Yoshiaki Takaki, the education minister, later stressed that the government would allow children to remain exposed to the updated levels of radiation.

“We will endeavor to bring radiation levels down,” Mr. Takaki told reporters on Tuesday.

Slow action by the government has set off a revolt among the usually orderly ranks of Japanese bureaucrats.

Some smaller towns and cities in Fukushima Prefecture have spurned orders from Tokyo, declaring their schools unsafe and sending in bulldozers to remove contaminated soil from the school grounds. A handful of individual children’s facilities, like Soramame, have done the same. In April, an adviser to Prime Minister Naoto Kan resigned over the new radiation guidelines, saying he would not let his own children be exposed to those levels.

“I don’t believe the government,” said Kanako Nishikata, 33, a mother of two elementary school children here. “The air here is dirty. The soil is dirty. They are leaving Fukushima to suffer and perish.”

The new radiation guidelines are one of many decisions the Japanese government will have to make about which areas around the stricken Fukushima nuclear plant remain habitable, experts said.

That decision is complicated because the radioactive materials from the plant have not emanated in neat circles. Instead, there are radiation hot spots outside the government-imposed 12-mile evacuation zone around the plant, straddling several towns and villages and parts of Fukushima City, home to nearly 300,000 people.

Although some of those towns and villages have started evacuations, Fukushima City, which includes parts with similarly high radiation readings, has routinely been excluded from evacuation plans. That has made some residents suspicious.

“They know it’s impossible to evacuate such a big city,” said Seiichi Nakate, a social worker who rallied local parents to found the Fukushima Network for Saving Children from Radiation. “But at least they should help evacuate the children, or do more to bring down the radiation.”

For now, life in Fukushima City seems suspended in competing, parallel realities. Many people roam the streets without the protective facial masks that others don religiously. Parents talk of not letting their children drink milk or tap water, or eat locally grown vegetables, while businessmen warn that such hysteria helps taint Fukushima’s reputation. The chatter at supermarkets is peppered with discussions of radiation levels. School fields and playgrounds across the city are eerily quiet.

At the meeting on Wednesday, parents pressed officials of the Fukushima education board for more action.

Of about 70 elementary and secondary schools in the city, officials have said workers will replace the soil at 26 schools with the highest radiation levels. The contaminated soil will be buried at least 20 inches deep within the school grounds. At some schools, work will not be done until mid-June.

Schoolchildren will still spend the bulk of the sweltering Fukushima summer indoors, with windows shut and no air-conditioning. (Japanese schools are rarely fitted with that luxury.) The city has promised at least four electric fans per classroom.

At the Soramame child care center, radiation levels remain low two weeks after its big soil transplant. The contaminated soil has been buried 20 inches below the surface. There is a new set of swings, but buckets and spades still lie in a heap, waiting to be thrown away.

Only 9 of the 23 children enrolled there before the disaster remain.

Some have fled Fukushima with their families.

“It will be a long road back to normal,” said Mrs. Monma, who runs the center. “And even then, we will need to warn future generations that we have buried something dangerous, just below the surface.”

Matthew L. Wald contributed reporting from Washington.