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# In Japan's Danger Zone, the Stranded Await the Merciful

By **MARTIN FACKLER**

YAMAGATA, Japan — Some are stuck in their homes, fearful of radiation, heeding government warnings to stay indoors, cut off without electricity or phone service. Others want to leave but have no gasoline. Still more, those whose homes were ruined, wait helplessly for evacuation at crowded shelters. All face dwindling supplies of heating fuel, food and water.

A week after an earthquake and tsunami devastated their communities and set off the worst nuclear accident since Chernobyl, the plight of the thousands still stranded in areas near the stricken reactors — many too old or infirm to move — has underscored what residents say is a striking lack of help from the national government to assist with the evacuation of danger zones or the ferrying of supplies to those it has urged to stay inside.

“Those who can leave have already left,” Nanae Takeshima, 40, a resident of Minamisoma, a city of 70,000 about 16 miles from the nuclear plant that lies within the area covered by the advisory to stay indoors, said by phone from her home. “Those here are the ones who cannot escape.”

Instead, the task has fallen to some local governments and even private companies and organizations that have made limited but heroic efforts to help those left behind, adding to the burden of coastal communities already overwhelmed by tens of thousands of people left homeless and the search for bodies, which the nuclear evacuations have now made impossible.

Residents reached by telephone said the order by the government to evacuate a 12-mile radius around the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station, as well as the request for those who live 12 to 18 miles away to stay indoors, has turned communities like Minamisoma into virtual ghost towns, populated mostly by the unwilling and the unlucky.

One is Masahiro Sakashita, who had prepared for the worst from the very beginning, but knew he could not leave. The director of the Fukujuen elderly care center, just 15 miles from

one reactor, he sent his younger employees home as Japan's battle to prevent nuclear catastrophe started, telling them to flee.

He and 19 other senior staff members stayed behind to keep caring for the center's 100 or so mostly bedridden residents, the oldest of whom is 102. He said they were cut off from the outside world, with electricity and delivery of food and other supplies disrupted. "I figured that at most we had enough food and water to last five, maybe six days," said Mr. Sakashita, who spoke by phone from Minamisoma. "We were going to stay with them to the end."

The end came Friday, when a similar care center in distant Yokohama, near Tokyo, volunteered to take in Fukujuen's residents after seeing their plight reported on television and sent six buses to rescue them.

Minamisoma has been using buses to begin evacuating the tsunami survivors and other residents to areas farther away from the nuclear plant. Other cities have helped by sending buses, as have some local companies.

One is the Shima Company, an auto-scraping business in Minamisoma, which hired buses to take more than 170 of its employees and their families to the city of Yamagata, 55 miles away, the company's vice president, Kazuki Shima, said on [Twitter](#).

With the help of other cities and the Fukushima prefectural government, Minamisoma has also moved all the tsunami survivors in 8 of its 29 shelters to other areas. At Haramachi No. 1 Elementary School, buses came Thursday to take about 300 survivors and other nearby residents to Gunma Prefecture, outside Tokyo.

The principal, Atsuo Takano, who runs the school's shelter, said that the school had begun to fill again with new refugees, those driven from their homes because they ran out of food and fuel. While he has sent his own family to an inland city for safety, he said he would keep working until the last person in the school's shelter was safely evacuated.

"Of course I'm worried, but I am responsible for this school," he said. "They told us that nuclear power was 100 percent safe, but we see now that nothing can ever be 100 percent safe."

Many of those left behind are elderly people whose houses survived the earthquake, but who feel abandoned as other residents flee the nuclear crisis. They say city officials and the police are nowhere to be seen, while stores and offices are closed and streets are empty.

Hatsuko Arakawa, 78, said that despite the fact that her city, Iwaki, was outside the area covered by the government order to stay indoors, delivery trucks refused to enter. As a

result, she said, she felt marooned in her home, with no more propane for her heater and dwindling supplies of rice and water. She endures the winter cold by spending the entire day wrapped in a futon.

“Unlike those in the refugee centers, I have no contact with the outside,” she said. “My supplies are reaching their limits.”

Misao Saito, 59, said he stayed in Soma, a small port city 27 miles north of the nuclear plant, because of his parents, who are too old and infirm to flee. He said his 80-year-old father had a bad leg, while his mother, 85, suffered from mild dementia. They now live together in an elementary school that was turned into a shelter after the tsunami damaged their home.

Mr. Saito, a fisherman, said he had no way to make a living because the waves destroyed Soma’s fishing harbor.

“It’s scary, but when it comes to the nuclear accident, I have no choice but to die here,” he said. “I think this is the government’s fault. The prime minister should have had a better grip on what was happening at that nuclear plant.”

Some of those who remained said they did so by choice. One, who asked that she be only partly identified as Misako W., seemed proudly defiant in her desire to remain in Minamisoma with her husband, a banker. She was also angry about her community’s fate. “Minamisoma is defunct,” she said.

She asked that her full name not be used because she feared discrimination in the future because of the nuclear crisis, just as survivors of the 1945 atomic bombings were ostracized out of a misplaced fear that they could spread radiation sickness.

“Many here have lost their homes, and now they have to fight the fear of the nuclear plant,” she said. “An earthquake, tsunami and now nuclear fears — there is no other place in the world as unfortunate as here.”

*Makiko Inoue contributed reporting.*

*This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:*

***Correction: March 18, 2011***

*An earlier version of this article misspelled the name of a small port city in Japan in one reference. It is Soma, not Souma.*

