

<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article2515>



Fukushima

“The Japanese population won’t accept it any longer”

- IV Online magazine - 2012 - IV446 - March 2012 -

Publication date: Wednesday 7 March 2012

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

On March 11, it’s exactly one year ago that North-Eastern Japan was hit by a major earthquake and a tsunami with giant 15 meter waves. One of the devastating consequences was a meltdown in the Fukushima nuclear power plant – the biggest nuclear disaster in 25 years. How is the situation today? Is everything under control? What about the population of Fukushima? How does the disaster influence the nuclear power debate in Japan? David Dessers of De Wereld Mogen asked Satoko Kishimoto, a Japanese climate activist who works for the Transnational Institute in Amsterdam: “People no longer believe what the government tells them. They now measure radiation levels themselves, search for alternative sources of information and take their own safety precautions. The government has abandoned people to their fate”. This interview was made in the run up to the demonstration “No more Fukushima” scheduled to take place on 11 March 2012 in Brussels.

What is the situation in the Fukushima power plant today?

Satoko: “The power station is now in a state of ‘cold shutdown’, which supposedly means that there is no further risk of a new nuclear meltdown. A constant stream of cold water insures that the temperature of the four reactors damaged by the tsunami of 11 March 2011 is constantly kept below 100 degrees. Overheating that can lead to explosions and a nuclear meltdown has been averted. However, it appears that cracks in the foundations still cause leaking of limited quantities of contaminated water and the question remains what consequences this will have for the environment, especially marine life. Moreover, a considerable number of people work in the Fukushima power plant on a daily basis. It remains a very hazardous undertaking but someone has to do it. These people risk their lives because they expose themselves to radiation in one way or another. This is the dilemma of a nuclear disaster: you have to sacrifice lives to prevent even worse things from happening.”

How did the disaster affect the citizens of Fukushima?

Satoko: “It’s shocking how a nuclear disaster like this divides the population and sets people against one another. The prefecture of Fukushima is the size of Flanders and has approximately two million inhabitants. Many people depend on agriculture for a livelihood. Naturally, the farmers would like nothing better than to resume work and provide for themselves and their families. However, it’s clear that their produce is contaminated by radiation. Much of these crops are therefore banned from the market. During the past year, many mothers with children have left Fukushima to seek accommodation in one of the larger cities like Tokyo or Osaka. The fathers usually stay put. They watch over the house and want to resume work, seeing as the compensation offered by the government is too meager to cover incurred losses. The nuclear disaster drives a rift between families, reduces mothers and children to poverty and sets farmers against one another. Growing tension between consumers in the cities and the farmers of Fukushima only aggravates the situation. Is it safe to eat farm produce from Fukushima? It’s not easy to find reliable information on this topic. Some experts say it’s not harmful for adults. Children and certainly babies, but also women who breastfeed, run a higher risk. This has to do with cell division. The impact is much greater when you’re still growing. That also causes discord. Fortunately many Japanese people show their solidarity with the farmers of Fukushima by continuing to buy their produce. And that’s just as well because otherwise Fukushima’s entire economy would grind to a halt resulting in even more hardship. But how far dare you go in eating contaminated food?”

How did the Japanese government react to the catastrophe?

Satoko: “After the disaster, an official “danger zone” was declared within a 20 kilometer radius of the power station. A month after the disaster, the zone was extended to 30 kilometers. All inhabitants of the zone, some 170.000 people, were evacuated with financial support from the government. But it’s clear that the designated zone is far too small. In the mean time, people were prudent enough to measure the level of radio activity at their own location. Even though they found themselves outside the 20 or 30 kilometer zone, a considerable number of people registered high levels of radio activity and decided to evacuate even though they could not count on help from the government. Farmers from areas just outside the official danger zone received a sort of economic compensation for suffered losses, but this was far from sufficient. Fukushima today is a totally dislocated community and neither the government nor TEPCO (Tokyo Electric Power Company, which exploits the Fukushima power plant) will pick up the tab. They’ve abandoned the people of Fukushima to their fate.”

How does Fukushima influence the nuclear power debate in Japan?

Satoko: “That’s very interesting. Japan has 54 nuclear power plants. Today only three are active. In Japan, nuclear power plants must undergo periodic safety checks. This is a normal procedure even if there are no evident problems. After a comprehensive inspection the power plant is restarted. But it seems that local authorities are systematically resisting the restart of nuclear power plants within their jurisdiction, resulting in increasingly more deactivated plants. In particular, this shows that people no longer have faith in current safety procedures. Due to lack of trust, local authorities oppose the restarting of nuclear facilities. Today only three power plants continue to function, but also for these remaining plants a safety check is imminent. The government fears that all of Japan’s nuclear power plants might therefore be out of action by the end of April. This is something they want to avoid at all costs. With summer in the offing and temperatures set to rise, the use of air conditioning will cause a peak in power consumption. Considering that Japan relies on nuclear power for more than thirty percent of its energy supply (the remainder comes almost exclusively from fossil fuel), it’s understandable that the government fears an energy shortage and is pressurizing local authorities to toe the line. This has sparked a major public debate in Japan, although I fear that several local authorities will give in shortly. At any rate: the public opinion and the media are currently strongly opposed to nuclear power...It will therefore be no easy task to restart the nuclear power plants.”

Are there also anti-nuclear power campaigns and demonstrations taking place?

Satoko: “Since Fukushima, a series of large demonstrations have taken place in Japan. The most recent manifestation, some 12.000 people demonstrating against nuclear energy, took to the streets of Tokyo on 11 February. “Datsu-Genpatsu” is the main slogan which means so much as “Bye bye nuclear power stations”. Demonstrators also invariably call for a nuclear-free world during these protests. An extensive national campaign has also been set up against nuclear power. Leading the campaign is the writer and Nobel Prize winner, Kenzaburo Ooe, a well-known intellectual with an international following who, despite his 77 years, plays a courageous role in bringing together a large group of fellow intellectuals to act as forerunners in the fight against nuclear power. Within the context of this campaign, numerous protests have been held in different cities throughout Japan. In addition to the demonstrations, many conferences, public debates and meetings centered on this theme have been organized, not only in major cities but also in Fukushima itself. There, a growing grassroots movement against nuclear power is also gaining momentum. That’s extremely important in light of the many problems that people here are facing.”

What will happen in Japan on 11 March?

Satoko: “That day will certainly not pass unnoticed. New demonstrations and manifestations are planned, among them in Osaka. But in Fukushima too, all kinds of activities are set to take place, including for example, a sort of people’s forum. The Japanese anti-nuclear movement has called for a world-wide day of action against nuclear power on 11 March. There is still much discontent in Japan about the government’s attitude. From the time the disaster struck, right up till the present day, the government has never been totally honest. Invariably more

“The Japanese population won’t accept it any longer”

information was held back than was made public. From the very start they downplayed the catastrophe, continuing to assert that everything was safe...People simply don’t believe that anymore. They are searching for their own information channels and try to protect their own health and that of their families. The most important lesson Fukushima teaches us is that after a nuclear disaster you find yourself on unknown terrain, never certain of how things really are, where countless hazards are trivialized. The damage is enormous. Therefore prevention is better than cure...

March 2012

First published on the website of the [Transnational Institute](#).