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City, Destroyed and Yet Hopeful, Begins to Move On

By MARTIN FACKLER

MINAMISOMA, Japan — After nearly four weeks of living in distant refugee shelters, or huddling indoors at home for fear of nuclear fallout, Toshie Nagasawa finally came here to say goodbye.

Gripping her husband's arm against the wind, Ms. Nagasawa, a calligraphy teacher, stood on a muddy plain that had been a forested neighborhood before a colossal tsunami tore it away. She bent to lay a bouquet of flowers on an exposed concrete foundation, all that was left of the home of two of her students, who disappeared in the waves.

The body of one, a third-grade girl, was later recovered. Her sixth-grade brother has yet to be found.

"I have been dreaming about them ever since it happened," said Ms. Nagasawa, 68, who wore a hat, gloves and a surgical mask to protect herself from radiation. "They were such a good family. I'm sorry it took me so long to come."

While the immense earthquake on March 11 and the tsunami that followed devastated hundreds of miles of coastline in northern Japan, communities like this one near a crippled nuclear plant have had a particularly bitter fate. Forced to evacuate or stay indoors, survivors could not search for missing loved ones, much less begin the long, painful journey of coping with their losses and rebuilding their shattered lives.

Now, this onetime ghost town is coming back to life. In recent days, a growing number of survivors have begun to return, walking through the debris to look for belongings or say prayers for those who did not make it.

While they still take precautions against radiation, most of the survivors share a budding, though perhaps premature, optimism that the worst of the nuclear crisis is over.

They are also emboldened by Japanese government reports showing that radiation levels in Minamisoma, 15 miles due north and upwind of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power

Station, have been falling for weeks.

Most of this small city lies in the voluntary evacuation zone, where the government has told those who choose to remain to stay inside to avoid radiation.

Those who came out last week despite the warnings seem to share the spirit of quiet defiance shown by many people in northern Japan, who have borne with stoicism and dignity the sorrows of nearly 30,000 people dead or missing. They said they wanted to get on with the process of healing, despite the risks.

“It is time to let go,” said Naomi Matsuura, 62, who came to see what was left of her home for the first time since the tsunami. “I couldn’t bear to come back for many days.”

Like many survivors here, she fled in the early days of the nuclear accident to shuttle among refugee centers, mostly school gymnasiums where she slept on the floor. But even after coming back to Minamisoma last week, she stayed away from her old neighborhood, saying she lacked the courage.

When she finally came, she did not tell her 89-year-old mother-in-law, whose heart may be too frail to bear the total loss of her longtime home.

“This used to be a peaceful village, with about 60 homes, and lots of pine trees and bamboo groves. You couldn’t see the sea, or those cliffs,” she said, gesturing toward the east, where nothing was left standing to impede the views of the white cliffs and the sea, about a mile away.

“Who could imagine a wave that could come this far?” she said, wiping a tear from her eyes, the only part of her face visible between her hat and surgical mask. “We have joined Chernobyl and Kobe,” she added, referring to the Ukrainian nuclear meltdown of 1986 and the devastating Japanese earthquake of 1995.

She and her sister-in-law, Shizuko Hoshi, 73, scavenged through piles of broken beams and boards that had once been homes. More than valuables, they hoped to find photographs or other mementos of their antediluvian lives.

Suddenly, Ms. Matsuura cried out. She had found a photo album. It was not theirs, but the two women still squatted to examine their find.

“Do you recognize that child?” asked Ms. Hoshi, pointing to a mud-smeared photo.

“No, but look! That’s the man who fixed our bathtub! He’s a refugee in Tokyo,” Ms. Matsuura said. “I’ll save this for him. He’ll be so happy.”

The women, who found a school yearbook too, shrugged off the failure to find their own photos, counting themselves lucky that their families had survived. But they said they would come back to search again the next day.

“I know there is the threat of radiation, but we have to think about the future,” Ms. Hoshi said. “Other disaster areas are already recovering. We are being left behind.”

The fear of falling behind was shared by members of the Minamisoma Fire Department, who combed the debris for bodies. One fireman, who declined to give his name, complained that they were only now conducting a thorough search because the city had received little outside help because of the fear of radiation.

The city says only 358 bodies of its estimated 1,500 dead have been recovered.

The firemen said the recovery effort was even worse closer to the plant, where only the military and police officers in protective garb were allowed to search and the bodies had to be handled like radioactive materials.

Many of the civilians who visited Minamisoma’s shattered neighborhoods also came for the dead, not to find their remains, but in hopes of finding something to help put their losses behind them.

Ms. Nagasawa, the calligraphy teacher, remembered the boy, Shun Konishi, whom she had taught at school since he was in first grade, as fond of cats — so fond, in fact, that he kept strays, sometimes against his parents’ wishes.

She said the girl, Shizuku, acted like a tough tomboy, but was saddened when one stray, named Kuro, died.

The two children were last seen leaving school with their grandfather minutes before the tsunami struck. Their grandfather, Toshimaru, was also missing.

After Ms. Nagasawa returned to her city on Saturday, the children’s father, Yasuhiro, had come to see her, in hopes that she had saved some examples of his children’s calligraphy. He, too, had lost most family mementos in the waves.

She had nothing to give him. But in her gracefully curving script, she later wrote a letter to the two children.

“Thank you for studying with me,” it said. “You used to ask where Kuro was. Now you are together with him. Please look after him there, too.”

She placed the letter on the concrete foundation next to the flowers, pinning it with a piece of broken cinderblock against the wind. She and her husband, Takao, pressed their palms together in silent prayer.

Suddenly, a bird's chirping broke the hush of the barren landscape.

"It's strange how the seasons continue, as if none of this ever happened," Ms. Nagasawa said, glancing up at the blue sky. "Spring comes back, but these little lives never will."