

## CROOKED CLEANUP: Ministry questions decontamination contractors; workers express hopelessness

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### THE ASAHI SHIMBUN

FUKUSHIMA--Workers in Fukushima Prefecture appeared tense on Jan. 7 as they kicked off this year's decontamination mission under increased scrutiny and the threat of punishment for breaking the Environment Ministry's rules.

The central government is trying to stamp out [the shoddy decontamination work](#) reported by The Asahi Shimbun--and has confirmed two cases so far. Yet the increased pressure on the workers could also heighten their sense of futility in trying to remove the radioactive substances that spewed from the crippled Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant.

Some workers said they dumped potentially contaminated soil, leaves and water into rivers and secluded forest areas to feel they were making progress in this huge and unprecedented project in Japan.

"If we follow the rules, we can never go home," said a decontamination worker in his 50s.

The government is not expected to review the framework of the program, which relies heavily on general contractors. Instead, it will try to ensure the ministry's rules are followed in the decontamination process, a crucial step in the plan to reduce radiation levels and allow evacuees to return home.

To determine if rules had been broken, an Environment Ministry office in Fukushima overseeing decontamination interviewed supervisors at four major construction companies that received lucrative government contracts.

Takashi Omura, chief of the office, said that water used for cleaning in December was not properly recovered in two instances, one in Naraha and the other in Iitate. A group that includes Maeda Corp. is cleaning up Naraha, while a group that includes Taisei Corp. is decontaminating Iitate.

Omura said the ministry is still investigating other cases.

"Our office is also responsible (for overseeing the companies)," Omura told a news conference on the night of Jan. 7. "We will conduct thorough supervision and instruction."

In an initial step, the ministry will station monitoring officials at the 17 locations where decontamination work is under way.

"We will strictly deal with violations as the ministry that awarded the contracts," Environment Minister Nobuteru Ishihara told reporters.

A ministry task force set up on Jan. 7 plans to compile measures by Jan. 18 to prevent a recurrence. Senior Vice Environment Minister Shinji Inoue, who leads the team, will visit the sites of slipshod cleanup as early as Jan. 9 and also meet with Fukushima Governor Yuhei Sato.

The Fukushima prefectural government asked the ministry to investigate the suspected violations reported by The Asahi Shimbun. The prefecture also proposed that local government officials and residents monitor sites that are beyond public view.

Goshi Hosono, a former environment minister, said the problem stems partly from the lack of an intermediate storage facility for contaminated soil and waste.

He said he would not be surprised if contractors tried to cut corners because they could not find a disposal area for a large amount of waste.

## NO END IN SIGHT TO WORK

But those on the front lines say the problem is much wider.

At a meeting before the day's shift on Jan. 7, a supervisor at one site told workers not to talk with reporters, sources said. The supervisor also told the workers to pay particular attention to the rules after explaining the Environment Ministry's instructions.

Under the rules, collected soil and leaves must be placed in bags to ensure radioactive materials do not spread further. The roofs and walls of homes must be wiped by hand or brushes, in principle.

In Tamura, workers were collecting leaves and branches with rakes in a forest along a road, but did not throw away the debris around the site.

In Naraha, 10 or so workers were removing surface soil and wiping home balconies. Pressurized sprayers, whose use is limited to gutters to avoid the spread of contaminated water, were not seen.

When an Asahi Shimbun reporter prepared to take a photo, one worker asked, "Do you live near here?" Others paused and turned their face to the reporter.

According to an official of a company involved in the cleanup, five workers must spend three days to decontaminate a home by hand, compared with only two hours if they use a pressurized sprayer.

"We will never be able to finish the work by the March deadline," the official said.

The worker in his 50s who longed to go home said workers are supposed to collect the water used to wash their boots and other tools after work. To save time, they use a river instead, he said.

Companies are only required to remove radioactive materials from buildings, roads and areas within 20 meters from those facilities.

A worker in his 20s said a supervisor told him to throw away waste because the crew "did not need to do anything beyond the areas marked with tape."

Some people said workers grow despondent after removing radioactive materials because new ones may flow in from beyond the 20-meter areas.

They said a feeling of helplessness led to a moral vacuum that enabled workers to ignore the Environment Ministry's rules.

Radiation levels must be measured after the decontamination work, but such sites are limited. Some workers said they only have to repeat the decontamination work in areas where radiation levels failed to drop.

Government monitoring has also been limited. Thousands of people are engaged in decontamination daily, but only a few dozen Environment Ministry officials go on patrol.

Some workers said they were told to exert extra effort only on days when ministry inspectors were scheduled to visit the sites.

(This article was compiled from reports by Harufumi Mori, Shunsuke Kimura, Tamiyuki Kihara, Miki Aoki and Toshio Tada.)

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