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Evacuees told they'll need to stay away for a generation

January 05, 2013

4

THE ASAHI SHIMBUN

In one of the first estimates of when Fukushima evacuees may return to their homes, the mayor of one nearby town is telling former residents that it could be 30 years away.

Katsutaka Idogawa, mayor of Futaba, a town close to the crisis-struck Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant, unveiled the provisional estimate during an address to his staff on Jan. 4.

He said 30 years is a realistic goal because that is roughly the half-life of radioactive cesium-137.

The Futaba town government was itself evacuated, but continues to function from a location in Kazo, Saitama Prefecture.

Idogawa said he would call on the central government, the government of Fukushima Prefecture, and on the plant operator, Tokyo Electric Power Co., to carry out thorough decontamination work in Futaba.

And he said he would dedicate those 30 years to improving living conditions for evacuated residents, such as their employment, housing, schooling and medical care.

The central government has made no promises about the return of people who were forced to flee from highly contaminated areas, despite evacuees voicing frustration at being left in limbo.

Idogawa referred to an ongoing bid to re-assess the risk from contamination and perhaps adjust the mandatory exclusion zone. But estimates by the central government say 75 percent of Futaba's 7,000 or so residents at the time of the March 2011 nuclear disaster were living in areas where annual radiation doses now exceed 50 millisieverts. Such areas are expected to be labeled "no-return zones," meaning evacuees cannot return for at least five years.

"Return will be possible only below 1 millisievert," Idogawa said.

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