Recovery from meltdowns patchy

FUKUSHIMA - Fukushima Prefecture’s recovery from the nuclear disaster has been patchy in areas tainted with radioactive material ejected by the Fukushima No. 1 power plant.

A year has passed since the government began realigning the evacuation zones around the stricken plant. The aim is to consolidate the hottest areas into three zones based on radiation level.

The three hot zones are based on annual dosage levels ranging from zero to 20 millisieverts, 20 to 50 millisieverts and anything over 50 millisieverts.
In the first zone, preparations are allowed to begin for the lifting of the evacuation order in the near future.

In the second zone, residents will have to wait some years to resume their lives.

In the third zone, the radiation is too high and residents are banned from returning for at least for five years.

Nine of the 11 tainted municipalities in Fukushima have been realigned. The other two are expected to be done by summer.

The first realigned places are making steady progress, but the others are dotted with ruined buildings and infrastructure, making rebuilding more difficult.

The government proposed the realignment plan in late 2011, with plans to reorganize all 11 municipalities in spring 2012.

Complaints about the slow decontamination work and compensation efforts by Tokyo Electric Power Co., however, prompted the government to discuss the plan with each of the tainted municipalities.

Tamura, a city about 20 km west of the nuclear plant that was originally in the no-go zone, was moved to the sub-20 millisievert zone in April 2012 and is recovering quickly.

The ban on vegetable shipments from Tamura was lifted last month, making it the first in the no-go zone to receive the green light for sales.

Residents and agricultural cooperatives in the city said that at least two farms are preparing to plant rice and others are planning to grow feed grain.

Infrastructure has almost been restored and decontamination is nearly finished.

Kazuhiro Tsuboi, 65, has finished cleaning up his house in Tamura and is ready to restart his life as soon as the evacuation order is lifted.

Tamura’s situation, however, is much different from the coastal part of Namie, a town that was shifted to the least-tainted zone just this month. Many of its houses were dilapidated after two years of neglect, and water and power services were disrupted.

“It will take at least four or five years to finish reconstruction,” a Namie municipal official said.

The remaining two municipalities awaiting realignment are the towns of Kawamata and Futaba, which cohosts the No. 1 plant.

The crippled plant’s Nos. 5 and 6 reactors sit in Futaba, now a no-go zone. Most of the town will likely end up in the top hot zone.
Futaba's realignment is likely to happen in early May, after the Golden Week holidays end.

Kawamata is in negotiations to complete its realignment by summer.