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COUNTERPOINT

Why is the potential turning point of 3/11 being allowed to slip away?

By **ROGER PULVERS**

Special to The Japan Times

First of two parts

Dried Anpo persimmons from Fukushima Prefecture are famed for staying fresh and juicy. However, for the second successive autumn, 90 percent of the crop has had to be discarded due to it registering radioactive contamination levels above legally set limits.

Mushrooms, a staple of Japanese cuisine, have now been found with unacceptable levels of radioactive cesium as far away from the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant, whose explosions and three reactor meltdowns caused the contamination, as Aomori and Nagano prefectures — several hundred kilometers away.

It is clear that the dangers lurking in the food we eat in this country have by no means been eliminated.

Now victims of radioactive contamination in Fukushima have come together to confront the nuclear power plant's owner and operator Tokyo Electric Power Co., and the Japanese government, that, as they see it, have together neglected their welfare.

A prime mover in the group, currently more than 150-strong, is lawyer Yoshitaro Nomura. However, members foresee the group eventually including 100,000 victims.

On Nov. 13, it issued a "Fukushima Human Rights Declaration" based on the Constitution's guarantee of the right of the citizenry's pursuit of happiness. This

said, "the victimizers evaded their responsibility by substituting (their own) causes for the real ones, made light of the situation, beat people down on the amounts owed to them and claimed everything was settled." Regarding government officials, group representatives at a symposium held last month stated: "They are now giving priority to restoring the economy over the health of the people living (in the affected areas)."

The declaration states, in part: "We have the right to decide for ourselves to choose whether we evacuate our land or not.

"We have the right to know about and acquire information, until we are satisfied, regarding the damages from radiation.

"We have the right to possess a healthy body, to love the nature of Fukushima and to enjoy our life.

"We have the right to claim total compensation for damage caused to our property by radioactive contamination."

Such forthright demands, backed up by legal advice from experts, constitute a rare phenomenon in the field of victims' rights in Japan. Altogether, the

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A piece of your mind

No K-pop on 'Kohaku'?

NHK says it considered public opinion before dropping the "Korean wave" performers from "Kohaku Uta Gassen," its annual New Year's presentation of notable musical artists. What's your take?

- Given the current tension, it's the appropriate action.**
- I'm disappointed. Entertainment and politics shouldn't be mixed.**
- What's the big deal? "Kohaku" always comes with some scandal attached. Since NHK is publicly funded, this is not unusual ... but it's still embarrassing.**
- My opinion of NHK would improve if it let the Koreans perform.**

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declaration shows how deeply the nuclear disaster has affected the psyche of the people of the Tohoku region of northeastern Honshu.

But has it also intruded convincingly into the consciousness of people living outside the contaminated region? And what are the Japanese people really prepared to do about the ravages that nuclear power plants can wreak in the event of accidents?

These questions are addressed brilliantly by Tetsunari Iida in an essay published online by The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus, and translated by film director John Junkerman. (I note here that I am an associate of this group of scholars and journalists.) In his essay, Iida, executive director of Tokyo-based research organization the Institute for Sustainable Energy Policies — and acting leader of the new Nippon Mirai no To (Japan Future Party) — begins by posing questions.

"Is it possible to shift despair concerning politics into the energy for reform?" he asks. "What is required for a new society and politics? How can we empower civil society to propose and implement new policies?"

He also puts into a historical context today's most compelling issue: The sustainability of Japan's body polity in its present form.

"Even before 3/11 (the date of the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011), Japan was in a state of collapse. A major cause of this was certainly the deteriorating framework of political parties, the bureaucracy and business that has prevailed since the Meiji Era (1868-1912); a breaking down that led to the catastrophic events in Fukushima.

"Faced with this catastrophe, many people concluded that this social and political deterioration had to be remedied and Japan's energy and nuclear power policies fundamentally changed. We are witnessing a once-in-a-century opportunity where such change is possible."

Until 3/11, Japanese governments turned a blind eye to the realities and pitfalls of nuclear power generation. Concomitant dangers were papered over by members of the so-called nuclear village, a gathering of mountebank-scholars and sycophants in the subsidized sway of the nuclear cartel.

What happened in the aftermath of the Great East Japan Earthquake and the tsunami it triggered was no "accident," Iida maintains. "The history of nuclear fuel-cycle efforts is marked by failures, fabrications and perverted policy," he contends.

Then, taking that long view, he compares the mentality underpinning that calamity with that in prewar and wartime Japan — and expresses a fear that the lessons of March 11, 2011, may fade with time.

"Why is Japanese politics allowing this historic turning point to slip away? Perhaps we are witnessing a repeat of the foolish, fatal failures suffered during the Pacific War."

He sees raising public awareness as the best chance to alter the direction of Japan's plunge right back into the past.

"Public literacy about energy and nuclear power is at an all-time high, making this an excellent opportunity to hold a full public debate on the matter," he says. "Politics in Japan may be in a historic transition, or we may be heading toward a historic failure. In the midst of this crossroads, what is required of civil society? What can we accomplish?"

"We have to change policy, to change politics. Everyone thinks so," he declares.

Iida refers in his essay to events that mark a maturation of Japanese politics from the grass roots up. Weekly demonstrations in front of the Prime Minister's Residence have attracted up to 200,000 people in all since they started in April this year. After Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda invited comments on possible options for the future of nuclear-power generation, nearly 90,000 were received from the public — 90 percent of them supporting the zero option.

Social networking on nuclear energy shows the Japanese public is significantly more aware of the issues involved than previously. In a country with a biased

press, interpersonal cyberspace has become the chief forum for open debate on the subject.

Whether such decidedly anti-nuclear public sentiment can be sustained when the press, overwhelmingly supportive of the nuclear industry (a huge source of advertising revenue), and the government — politicians and bureaucrats — are touting alternative-energy generation as uneconomical and unrealistic remains to be seen.

Most estimates of the relative costs of alternative versus nuclear energy generation appearing in the Japanese press fail to take into account diminishing costs of the former as technologies become widely applied, and the enormous expense to the economy of the latter when accidents occur — let alone the safe storage of nuclear waste for untold centuries to come.

The nuclear catastrophe in March 2011 cannot be considered a unique or isolated event in a country plagued by earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions and typhoons.

The words of the resolute and courageous group of victims who declared their rights in the face of deception, coverup and injustice ring out: "We have lost many things as a result of the nuclear plant accident. We don't want to lose any more."

This should be the cry of people in every prefecture of this country.

Counterpoint will next week ask: Are the aftereffects of Fukushima going to be similar to those of Chernobyl?

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