

nion

Our beastly post-Fukushima age

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Half-life is one of the basic technical terms in dealing with radioactive materials. Plutonium-239, for example, has a half-life of 24,100 years, meaning that it takes that long for its radioactivity to fall to half of its original level. To remind people that an immeasurable time is needed for plutonium-239's radiation to drop to a harmless level, Danish film director Michael Madsen used the title "Into Eternity" for his 2010 documentary film on the underground storage of nuclear waste in Finland.

Since the average life-expectancy of human beings is around 80 years at best, even 1,000 years is far too long a time for us to imagine what the world will be like then.

A former director in Japan who has produced excellent TV programs on Hiroshima, Chernobyl, etc., once made a metaphorical warning that the half-life of human memory is rather short. His warning hits the nail on the head as we tend to lose our knowledge of disastrous accidents even of a world scale in a short time.

And even though we experienced a catastrophe in Fukushima in our own country, three years sometimes seem to be already too long to keep the memory. Although numerous columns and essays, including mine, will appear around March 11, it is not enough to remember the day only once a year. The disaster still continues.

Masami Yoshizawa lives on his farm with more than 300 cows in the town of Namie about 14 km from Tokyo Electric Power Co.'s Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant, where the triple reactor meltdowns occurred. He has been criticized for staying on and keeping domestic animals there because it is illegal to live in that area heavily contaminated with radioactive materials released from the plant. His life itself is a rebellion against the law.

Two years ago in Fukushima, I happened to listen to him shouting to participants of a first anniversary memorial ceremony of the 3/11 disaster. Roaring from outside the

place, he said, "We are still alive but we have no meaning to live!"

He wrote what he meant in his blog essay titled "Fukushima and Namie embracing Chernobyl," dated March 1, 2012. "The time has stopped in Futaba and Namie since the huge confusion in evacuation.... The towns and the visions of their inhabitants have been divided.... Cultivating rice has no meaning. Kindergartens, elementary and other schools have no meaning since children or their parents will not come back.... There is no meaning in hospitals, supermarkets or other shops.... I personally do not see any meaning in decontamination of radioactive fallouts.... What could be our hope here?"

Certainly it must have been extremely difficult to find any hope for the future, but Yoshizawa has named his farm Ranch of Hope. He says that although he knows that there is no economic value in his domestic animals exposed to radiation, it does not necessarily mean that they are "walking debris" — a terrible label given by officials of the agriculture ministry who want these animals "disposed of," i.e., killed.

Yoshizawa is entirely right. Life is not a commodity, and these animals do not need to be killed just because their flesh or milk cannot be eaten or drunk and it is costly to keep feeding them. What kind of law is it that forces them to be killed?

Yoshizawa's protest reminds me of Seiichi Motohashi, a film director who focused on disappearing villages near Chernobyl after the nuclear accident. His first motivation to film them was aroused by an old farmer who refused to leave his place. "Where else should I go? It is human beings that tainted this land," the farmer said to Motohashi. This farmer also lived with an increasing number of cows that could not be sold and his life was a silent protest.

I do not mean to insist at all that it was or is unjust to escape after a serious accident. The right to flee from a danger has to be guaranteed as one of the basic rights of living creatures. And farmers who slaughtered their precious animals in accordance with an order from the government should be compensated. But it is also essential to realize that arbitrary political decisions to designate some areas

as "exclusion zones" or cancel the designation destroy the lives of inhabitants.

Yoshizawa's Ranch of Hope is not an instrument of politics. It is intended to offer epidemiological case studies of animals exposed to radiation. A veterinarian for the ranch, Setsuro Ito, said that he would welcome it if some professional laboratories or researchers were interested in doing collaborative work with him and Yoshizawa.

Motohashi has recently produced a film on the slaughtering of cows for food, "A Story of a Butcher Shop," directed by Aya Hanabusa. The family running this butcher shop in Osaka has traditionally raised, slaughtered and butchered cows and sold their meat for more than 100 years.

The slaughterhouse was closed in 2012 and the film, which describes the closing days of the shop, shows the whole process that eventually leads to us buying and eating meat. We can understandably assume why Motohashi committed himself to this film. For most people, the slaughter of animals for the sake of obtaining nourishment is unavoidable.

Further, this perspective of Motohashi leads us to a better understanding of the meaning of the toil of Yoshizawa. His life of offering his cows to our nourishing process was ruined by the Fukushima catastrophe and his experience, although seemingly indirectly, has significance for our dietary life. The system to offer not only meat but also vegetables, rice, fish and many other kinds of food is still suffering from the disaster in this country. We have to remember Fukushima from this perspective.

Chikako Nakayama is a professor of economic thought at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies.

Correction

In the author's Feb. 24 article "Uphold basic living standards," the second sentence in the fourth paragraph from last should have read, "But in other cases, elderly people are using their pension benefits as collateral to secure loans so they need welfare payments to make ends meet."

OUTRAGED
CITIZENS
TAKE TO THE
STREETS
EN MASSE...

BLOODY
CONFLICT
ENSUES...

KAL
CAL/NYTS

POLICE

GOVERNMENT
IS
TOPPLED...

ELECTIONS ARE
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NEW MAP

US THEM NOT SURE
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