

The PHOTO JOURNAL

VOL.00 18
Sept. 5th, 2017
FREE

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Photo news stories and documentaries since 2015

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ATONEMENT FOR LIFE





Ishizaki visits the Yonomori cherry blossom trees in Tomioka where the traditional illumination event was held for the first time since the accident. "I visited this place many times while director (of 2F). It's a moving to see the same sight again" (April 2014)

Interview with Yoshiyuki Ishizaki TEPCO Fukushima Revitalization Headquarters Representative

SERIES
FUKUSHIMA

Photo & Text by
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FUKUSHIMA. Japan -- In January 2013, following the accident at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, TEPCO set up the Fukushima Revitalization Headquarters at J-Village football fields in the town of Hirono. Their mission was to carry out recovery operations including the handling of residents' compensation and land decontamination as swiftly as possible closer to the frontlines of the accident (the headquarters have since moved to Tomioka Town). Yoshiyuki Ishizaki took on the role of the operation's first representative, and will be retiring tomorrow on June 23.

I had come across Ishizaki numerous times in various places while covering Fukushima, and had been interested in talking to him before he left his position. I believe it necessary to see with your own eyes and talk to people in person to be able to genuinely understand what is going on. There are things you will never understand without doing so. The fact that I met Ishizaki everywhere suggested that he took on this hands-on approach. Despite his position as the representative of the Revitalization Headquarters, as well as Executive Vice President of TEPCO, watching him actively scramble about the prefecture made me feel that he was genuinely committed to the recovery of Fukushima.

In July 2015, I accompanied the members of Fukko-Hamadan, the group based in Minami-Soma, on one of their Fukushima Daiichi observation tours. After touring the facility under the guide of Ishizaki, there was an opportunity to question him in person. "The fact is, lives were lost due to the nuclear accident. Does TEPCO still consider nuclear power plants a necessity?" Considering his responsibilities at the company, I asked this question expecting him to just beat around the bush. But after apologizing once again for the loss of lives, he clearly stated, "I think nuclear power plants are necessary at the moment", and explained why. I was not satisfied with his answer nor the explanation that followed, and imagine many others would want to counter his argument as well. But I am sure he was speaking from his heart. Although we all have differing opinions, dialogue remains the only way to build a society. It is useless when one party is not speaking candidly, and I have seen, especially in the recent days, a fair share of those who lack sincerity and whose idea is to only save their own skin. But I felt that Ishizaki, at least, was a TEPCO executive that could hold a truthful dialogue.



At the time of the accident, Ishizaki's job at TEPCO's Tokyo head office was to maintain relations between the company and the communities where its power plants were located. After busily sending out relief supplies to two hundred or so emergency shelters, he then spent many days visiting the evacuation shelters apologizing to the residents along with the company president. There were 165 thousand evacuees in the evacuation zone alone. Upon seeing the number of people and the squalid conditions they were living in, Ishizaki firmly realized the sever effect of the accident. There were familiar faces among the people he visited to *dogeza*, bowing his head so deeply that it touched the ground, the traditional Japanese way to express the deepest of apologies. Many of them were acquaintances from his tenure as director of Fukushima Daini Nuclear Station (2F) for three years until 2010. He was met with outrage and hatred. "You. You said that it was absolutely safe!" "You're a minion of the world's worst polluting company!" Nuclear plants are absolutely safe. That was what Ishizaki was taught and what he came to believe, and with conviction, was what he had continually assured the residents around the plant while he was director at 2F. For thirty years, Ishizaki took pride in the job of supporting the country by providing electricity. What was all that worth now? The mutual relationship and trust that had been built between the plant and the residents of Hamadori, the coastal area of Fukushima, was destroyed in the blink of an eye. Ishizaki resolved to confront the accident for the rest of his life thinking, "If I were to run and abandon these people, I will go to hell".

During those days in 2012, plans got underway at TEPCO to establish a division within Fukushima prefecture to speed up recovery efforts. Ishizaki, who had become managing director in June, took part in the preparations. When the division's launch was finalized in January 2013, he was appointed as the representative.

At first, Ishizaki considered his role a target where the residents could fling their frustration, anger and sorrow. He would go around and listen, and they would tell him how they had once imagined returning home sooner. Tending to the residents' needs, or so called "recovery implementing actions", like mowing the weeds and cleaning up abandoned houses, is one of the main jobs of the Revitalization Headquarters. As time went by, the efforts started to take hold and residents started to express gratitude. Their daily lives settled down and old acquaintances would sometimes reminisce how they shared drinks while Ishizaki was



Ishizaki chats with acquaintances on a train running between Odaka and Namie station on April 1, 2017. The Joban railway resumed operation this day



Rows of tanks containing contaminated water are seen in Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station (April 2017)



Ishizaki snaps a photo of a resident's baby boar at a village event in Katsurao. Evacuation orders of the village were partially lifted on this day (June 12th 2016)

director at 2F.

Ishizaki made efforts to understand the residents' situations and needs, and what changes were taking place by visiting the sites and meeting people personally. He dropped by all the local events and activities he was aware of and even visited residents who had voluntarily evacuated to faraway Kyushu. When commuting from the company housing in Hirono Town where he lived separated from his family, he would leave the driver along the way to observe the changing environment on foot.

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When asked about the most memorable episode during the past four and a half years, he talked of Takayuki Ueno from the Fukko-Hamadan. Ueno had lost four family members to the tsunami and was still searching for his father and son. Shortly after Ishizaki had become Representative of the Revitalization Headquarters, Shin Owada, an announcer from Radio Fukushima at the time, had urged Ishizaki to go see Ueno. Without receiving any explanation as to who he was, Ishizaki set out to meet Ueno. In front of the remnants of Ueno's tsunami torn house, the business card Ishizaki handed over was immediately tossed away, and with the "expression of a demon", Ueno shouted "Why show up after all this time!" Ueno's fists were shaking and Ishizaki expected him to start throwing punches. In front of the family altar inside the house built adjacent to old one, Ishizaki bowed deeply in the *dogeza* custom, and for two hours, listened to the pent-up anger that had been raging inside Ueno. How the police and Self Defense Force had abandoned the search because of the explosion at the nuclear plant. How only Ueno and his friends continued the search and recovered tens of bodies. How his wife, being pregnant at the time, had to evacuate and could not even attend their daughter's funeral.

Ishizaki also heard the following story from Ueno. There was one particular TEPCO employee in charge of the Minami Soma area whom Ueno had vented his anger at. After the encounter, the employee surreptitiously began visiting the numerous alters that had been put up around Ueno's Kaihama district, to put his hands together and pray. Ueno's feelings shifted slightly as he silently observed this daily morning ritual. He still despised TEPCO, but he noticed that his hatred was not directed at the individual employees. "You should be grateful that you have such honorable people as employees", he told Ishizaki. As Ishizaki was about to leave, Ueno added, "I will never forgive TEPCO. I will be watching you from now on, all the time." Those words have been on Ishizaki's mind ever since.

Ishizaki's candid manner during the observation tour also made Ueno view him differently. Other people like Norio Kimura from Okuma, whose efforts to find his family after the tsunami were drastically hindered by the nuclear accident, was also present. After the tour, Ueno commented without hiding his astonishment "Considering his position, I'm surprised he said that." He viewed Ishizaki as "an honest person", and felt he could be trusted. The relationship has solidified enough for Ueno to call Ishizaki directly to discuss matters, and for TEPCO employees to help out at events like the flower maze and firework displays organized by Fukko-Hamadan.

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For some, though, this may not be enough. One of them is Kimura. While accepting his sincerity, Kimura was angered by Ishizaki's view regarding nuclear energy. Kimura lost three family members and was still searching for his daughter, but still faced many difficulties due to the surrounding area of his home becoming a "difficult to return zone" due to the nuclear contamination. Ishizaki learned that some bones belonging to Kimura's daughter had finally been found in December 2016, and had thought of visiting to apologize again. But he was hesitant after considering the pain Kimura must be going through. After some time, Ishizaki went to the search site in Okuma. Kimura thanked him for coming, though he also thought, "Why come now and not help me before she was found?"

It's easy to assume that not everyone will ever be able to put their anger to rest, nor to consider that this tragedy will ever be overcome. But there may be no other way than to proceed in whatever way, through dialogue.

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The Director's position has now been succeeded by Makoto Okura, and Ishizaki will continue to participate in the recovery efforts as Special Adviser for Revitalization. He considers his mission to hand down his experience during the eight years at Fukushima, including the time as director of 2F, to all people, whether they be employees of his organization or not. He recently heard, for the first time, the experiences of an employee who handled compensation requests, and considers handing down these stories as one of TEPCO's responsibilities.

He also wishes to utilize his network of personal contacts, one he believes to be the most extensive within the company, to help rebuild the communities. Solving problems like the infestation of wild boar which is hampering efforts to restart agriculture, have already started. He hopes to travel around Fukushima more often than before to find how the residents' needs are changing as recovery efforts progress. "A company is none other than the individual employees it is composed of. In order for the company to regain the trust of the people, each employee must do his or her best and take action" he says.

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■ Additional excerpts from the interview

- Do you think the current compensation for the residents is adequate?

The reparation will be dealt accordingly, but that does not mean our responsibilities end there. That's what the Revitalization Headquarters are for. Whether everyone feels satisfied or not will depend on each person's perspective.

- Besides TEPCO, who else do you think bears responsibility for the Fukushima Daiichi Accident?

Legally, I do not know who is responsible. If the trial concludes that TEPCO was exclusively at fault, the company must bear responsibility. However, the handling of the accident's aftermath is indisputably TEPCO's responsibility.

- Why is nuclear energy necessary?

We are responsible for providing electricity according to the government's energy policy. Our mission is to provide the electricity that our citizens demand. Electricity production is based on long term projections and is not something that can be change immediately. We depend partially on nuclear energy. Also, in order to stably supply electricity, diverse methods of production become necessary. Japan's energy self-sufficiency ratio is currently six percent*. Japan is poor in natural resources, and there is no way to ensure a stable supply of coal or natural gas. But, even if TEPCO passes Japan's new regulatory standards, it remains to be seen if it is qualified to run nuclear plants after causing the accident. This will depend on how qualified the employees are, including the way each of them conduct themselves daily. It is not up to us to decide whether we continue nuclear energy production or not. We are responsible for supplying energy, so public opinion must be reflected upon the nation's energy policy.

Electricity companies take on a risk by operating nuclear plants. It is definitely more challenging than other methods so it is easier for us to do without them. But we continue using them while weighing the risks because they are necessary. The accident occurred because we were overconfident as engineers and we didn't make enough efforts. We are responsible to make every effort to prevent accidents and to inform the world so that such accidents never happen again.

* Japan's energy self-sufficiency ratio in 2014. In 2010, before the nuclear accident, the ratio was 19.9% (nuclear energy accounted for 15%). 100% of the uranium needed for nuclear energy production is imported into Japan, but due to its energetic density, storability and reprocessing characteristics, the International Energy Agency (IEA) considers nuclear electricity production as a "semi-domestic power source" and counts it as self-sufficient energy. Based on this IEA classification, Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) considers nuclear energy as self-sufficient energy. Japan's spent fuel reprocessing project has been held up for several years.

Is TEPCO the only one responsible? Are they the only ones that should be reflecting upon the accident and taking measures? I was reminded that we too, should be doing the same. If a company is none other than the individual employees it is composed of, in the same way, a country is comprised of its individual citizens. Regarding the accident, as well as other matters, what will prevent us from making the same mistakes unless we all think of the future and act together?

While working in Hamadori as director of 2F, Ishizaki became so fond of the place that he planned to live in Tomioka after retirement. He was scheduled to check out an apartment on March 12, 2011, a day after the accident, and still holds that wish. Ishizaki has decided to involve himself with Fukushima for life, even after he leaves TEPCO and is no longer an employee. He hopes that one day, he will be able to invite people to his dream house, and whether opinions differ or not, continue the exchange of dialogue. Along with Ueno, I also plan on following his commitment to Fukushima.



Ishizaki(right) shows Ueno(center) and members of the Fukko-Hamada around Fukushima Daini



In the restricted area of Okuma Town, Ishizaki places flowers where the daughter of Kimura(left) was found (January 2017)



Ishizaki personally guides visitors around Fukushima Daini (May 2016)



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