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After the Quake: The Town That Was Washed Away□□地震の後―洗い流された町

Between 2012 and 2014 we posted a number of articles on contemporary affairs without giving them volume and issue numbers or dates. Often the date can be determined from internal evidence in the article, but sometimes not. We have decided retrospectively to list all of them as Volume 10, Issue 54 with a date of 2012 with the understanding that all were published between 2012 and 2014.

By David McNeill in earthquake-stricken Minami Sanriku, Japan -- It was once a family house in this northeastern corner of Miyagi Prefecture. Mum would have cooked dinner on the kitchen stove. Children may have played video games in the front room, facing the Pacific Ocean. Now all that's left of the house is its bare concrete base and a few scattered belongings: the shreds of a kimono and a child's schoolbag.

Like almost everything else in this town of 17,666 people, it was washed into the sea. "The water was ten meters high," recalls Koichi Tsuto, who like many who evacuated on short notice watched in horror from the safety of surrounding mountains as last Friday's tsunami roared into Minami Sanriku and swept everything he had into a giant muddy deluge. "It was like a mountain of water," he says, eyes widening. Beside him, his wife Fujiko looks shattered, defeated. They have come to see if there is anything left and come away empty-handed.

The tsunami has left this town in ruins, smashing wooden houses into matchsticks, twisting metal girders like strips of liquorice. Cars were pushed along with everything else over two kilometers inland before piling to a muddy stop. Gas cookers, children's toys, photograph albums and trucks are deposited all along the tsunami's muddy trail. And 10,000 people have simply vanished.

"I've come to look for my mother and father," says Yuki Sugawara (25), who took two days to reach this town from Sendai City, about 50 kilometers away. His ruined hometown is almost completely silent apart from the caw of crows and the distant hiss of the sea that erupted with such terrible, unexpected violence two days ago. His schoolboy friend Makoto Ishida (25) is from the same town. "I haven't been able to contact my mother or grandmother," he says. "I just came to see what's left."

From the mountains that ring this once picturesque farming and tourist town, the devastation is almost total. A house, tottering on its side, somehow survived the deluge. The post-office, no doubt bustling with staff and pensioners on Friday afternoon, is recognisable only by its battered sign. A car lies on its back in a landscape of still smoldering steel and chopped wood. Power lines and telephone cables have disappeared. Underneath, the rescue workers say there may be bodies, those that haven't been carried into the Pacific.

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In one of the world's richest countries, it is a shocking sight: a once thriving town flattened into the ground, its modern infrastructure stripped bare, its people - office workers, students and farmers - reduced to walking in search of homes that are no longer there. Minami Sanriku, a town the size of Strabane, has effectively ceased to exist.

Its survivors huddle around gas heaters in a community center about three kilometers from the sea. There is no TV or radio. A noisy generator keeps the lights on. News comes in the newspapers delivered late every morning, with their thick black headlines bearing the latest catastrophe from the rest of the country. Tomorrow, Tokyo will lose power for the entire day, inevitably bringing back terrible memories of World War 2 to a generation who thought such sights were gone forever. "We didn't hear about the nuclear plant explosion till today," says Eiko Chiba, who huddles beside her daughter on a futon."It's terrifying. All we can do is hope that the people in charge are doing their best."

Mrs. Chiba was working in an office a few kilometers inland when then tsunami struck. She and her friends screamed when they felt the quake, which was followed by a tsunami warning. "We went up on top of the building to watch the water. It bulged at the side of the buildings then rushed in and submerged all the houses. Then it took them away." Her husband, a truck driver, was in Tokyo when the quake struck. "He's safe. I talked to him on his cellphone. But he's stuck in the city."

With the dark and cold descending, community spokesman Jin Sasaki says the search for bodies has been called off and will begin again tomorrow. "We've found 13 so far," he explains. "When we discover one, we give it to the family or take it to the local temple." He has heard some of what is going on in Sendai, the prefectural capital, where officials are overwhelmed searching for 115,000 missing people in this one region alone. Over 700 shelter in what has become a makeshift refugee center in the prefectural offices, lying on blankets and futons in the halls and offices. Many are from nearby Iwate Prefecture, where the quake reportedly hit hardest. "Most people are trying to find their families," says government spokesman Moto Otsuki. "Phones aren't working."

The survivors scan bulletin boards in the prefectural office for news of their loved-ones. Some will be fortunate. Takehiro Abe is walking back from Minami Sanriku on rail tracks that until last week ferried trains around the picture-postcard coast. "I learned that my father, mother and younger brother are all safe, in a refugee center," he explains. I just went down to see our house, to check if anything is left, but it's completely gone. We'll have to build somewhere else - we can't come here."

Somewhere in the distance, a siren wails, warning of yet another aftershock and tsunami. The few people still walking around in the dusk slowly head back toward the safety of high ground, away from the sea. What else can the sea do to them? they seem to be saying.

Japan is aging, its economy past its peak, its government struggling with huge dept. How will it pay for the recovery of towns like Minami Sanriku, for the hundreds of communities all along this coast struck silent by last week's awful events? "Right now, we're just thinking of tomorrow and saving people," says community

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spokesman Mr. Sasaki. "But however long it takes, we will rebuild. People are depending on us to bring the town back."

But Mrs. Chiba, huddling with her daughter and waiting for her husband to come home, will not be among the rebuilders. "I could never go back. I can't even think about it. I can never feel safe in that town now."

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