The Mainichi Daily News

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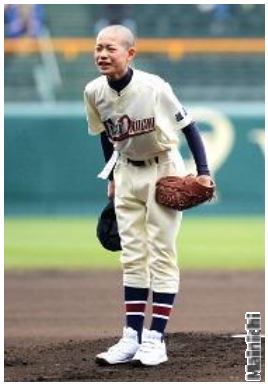

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News

Anti-nuclear activist sees commonalities between Minamata and Fukushima

Aileen Mioko Smith explains that she thought of "The 10 Strategies Taken by the State, Prefectural Governments, Academic Flunkies and Companies in the Cases of Minamata and Fukushima" during a sit-in in front of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. (Mainichi)

According to Aileen Mioko Smith, who together with her late husband, the photographer Eugene Smith, drew the world's attention to one of Japan's most far-reaching pollution-caused diseases, the ongoing Fukushima nuclear crisis and Minamata disease have many things in common.

"Inequality," said Smith, when asked what it is that both disasters have. It was not the government's inaction that she brought up first, but rather the unfairness of it all.

"Minamata disease emerged when major Japanese chemical manufacturer Chisso Corp. found itself lagging behind its competitors in the industry's switch to petrochemicals, decided to sacrifice Minamata (Kumamoto Prefecture), and made money from it. While environmental contamination was forced onto Minamata, Chisso Corp.'s headquarters flourished," Smith said. "The same can be said of Fukushima. If the nuclear power plants had been built in Tokyo, no energy loss would have been incurred through electric power transmission. But the plants were built in Fukushima, and Tokyo enjoyed the electrical power. The structure of inequality, in which someone gains and someone loses, is the same."

In other words, the regional areas of Japan are sacrificed for the large cities.

"If we think about it in terms of 'damage times the number of residents,' you could say there'd be less total damage in the sparsely-populated countryside than in a major city. But doesn't such thinking ignore the value of each and every life? For each individual, sustaining any harm is already a 100-percent loss."

Smith's personal experiences began with her seeing the world from the inside of foreign-made cars. Born to an American father who was in the international trade business and a Japanese mother, it was through the windows of her father's cars that Smith saw the demonstrations against the U.S.-Japan security agreement in 1960 and poor children in Hong Kong and Vietnam leaping onto the very cars she was riding in. She felt guilt swelling up inside her, and longed to be on the outside.

After her parents divorced, the 11-year-old Smith went to stay with her grandparents in the U.S. She had been discriminated for being of mixed

race while in Japan, but once she arrived in St. Louis, she was looked down upon for being Japanese. Her yearning for Japan building, Smith vowed never to tolerate those who looked condescendingly upon Japan and the rest of Asia.

At the root of Smith's disdain for inequality, then, was her wavering childhood status as victimizer and victim, the oppressor and the oppressed.

At age 20, Smith met the world-renowned photographer Eugene Smith, who was 52 years old at the time. They married and relocated to Minamata, where they took pictures. Smith served also as an interpreter for her husband, who spoke no Japanese. They accompanied Minamata disease patients to trials, and spent days and nights with them. Ever since she reported on the Three Mile Island accident in 1979, the year after her husband's death, Smith has been an avid anti-nuclear advocate based in Kyoto.

After the Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami on March 11, 2011 triggered a nuclear disaster, Smith has visited Fukushima numerous times as the head of an environmental civic organization. She has also staged sit-ins in tents set up in front of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI).

"I've written out the things that Minamata disease and the Fukushima nuclear crisis have in common," Smith said, placing two sheets of paper on the table in front of her. The list was titled: "The 10 Strategies Taken by the State, Prefectural Governments, Academic Flunkies and Companies in the cases of Minamata and Fukushima."*

Smith explained: "No one has made it clear who is responsible for the nuclear disaster. It's not even clear who set the evacuation standard of '20 millisieverts of radiation per year.' Government bodies make use of their own sectionalism to pin the blame on each other, saying 'It's the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology' or 'No, it's under the jurisdiction of the Nuclear Safety Commission.'

"Even though there's said to be no such thing as a 'safe' amount of exposure to radiation, authorities intentionally release the vague suggestion that 'being exposed to 100 millisieverts of radiation per year is all right,' further confusing victims. These are tactics that we saw the government and academics use all too much with the case of Minamata disease."

Smith is critical also of the Fukushima prefectural residents' health management survey conducted by the prefectural government, saying: "Its starting point is the conclusion that radiation exposure levels are not too bad, and is merely a strategy to minimize eligibility for compensation."

What pains Smith the most are the rifts appearing among disaster victims. "A teacher in Fukushima Prefecture who temporarily took time off from work immediately after the outbreak of the nuclear disaster to help evacuate family members was slammed as a 'coward' and 'traitor' from colleagues... Everyone's scared. And precisely because they so desperately want to overcome this together, people are unable to forgive those who leave Fukushima."

The people Smith sees in Fukushima look to her a lot like what she saw in Minamata. In both, things reach a reconciliation or go to trial.

"The Minamata victims also broke down into several factions, and were pushed into corners where they couldn't help hurting each other. The scars remain even today, some 50 years later," Smith said. And this is all the more reason she wants to offer this to the Fukushima victims: "To flee or not to flee. Whether one is even able to flee or not. Clashes are taking place in cities, places of work, and even families. But stop and think. It was the state and (Fukushima plant operator) Tokyo Electric Power Co. that pulled us apart. Who is going to gain from clashes among the victims?"

On March 11, 2011, Smith was in the U.S. with her daughter, enjoying some time off for the first time in a while. What went through her mind when she saw television footage of the Fukushima nuclear plant in crisis was that "many decades worth of suffering was about to begin." Just like the years of suffering that the Minamata disease had wrought.

Minamata disease, a neurological syndrome caused by mercury that was dumped into Minamata Bay by Chisso Corp., was officially recognized by the government in 1956. In 2004, the Supreme Court practically overturned Minamata certification standards set in 1977, saying they were "too narrow." In 2009, the government passed a law on special measures for compensation of Minamata disease patients, but has decided to close registration for compensation claims by the end of July 2012. This has patient advocacy groups, whose fight has continued for half a century, up in arms that the government continues to write off Minamata victims.

"The leaders of Minamata advocacy groups are now in their fifties. These are people who, as young children, ingested fish that were tainted with mercury. It makes me wonder every time I go to Fukushima. I don't want to create a reality where the only choice we have when those who are young children now ask us in the future: 'What were you adults doing at the time?' is to apologize."

As I went to stand up after speaking with Smith for three hours, she stopped me and said: "I want you to understand this much."

"Having been involved in both Minamata and Fukushima, there are times when I begin to fall under the illusion that I live in the same world as the

victims, but that's not true. The suffering of the victims cannot be understood unless you are in their position. To be aware of the fact that I cannot understand how they feel, and yet advocate on behalf of and face the victims straight-on is a frightening thing to do.

"But still, I think I will keep using my voice. Because I want both the people who live in Fukushima and the people who fled Fukushima to realize that as with the Minamata victims, they, too, have been forced into opposition with each other. By re-examining this fact, perhaps they can find some measure of comfort or salvation."

"The 10 Strategies Taken by the State, Prefectural Governments, Academic Flunkies and Companies in the Cases of Minamata and Fukushima"

1. Do not take responsibility. Use sectionalism to pin blame on others.

2. Confuse victims and public opinion, creating the impression that there are pros and cons on each side.

3. Position victims in conflict with each other.

4. Do not record data or leave evidence.

5. Stall for time.

6. Conduct tests or surveys that will produce underestimated results on damage.

7. Wear victims down until they give up.

8. Create an official certification system that narrows down victim numbers.

9. Do not release information abroad.

10. Call on academic flunkies to hold international conferences.

(By Ayako Oguni, Evening Edition Department)

(Mainichi Japan) March 4, 2012

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