

Introductory Remarks

Minamata Disease — Japan's Worst Industrial Pollution Disaster

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http://aileenarchive.or.jp/minamata_en/index.html

Minamata Disease, methyl mercury poisoning caused by eating fish and shellfish contaminated by the factory waste water released from the Chisso corporation in Kumamoto, Kyushu is considered Japan's worst industrial pollution disaster.

May 1st marks the 50th anniversary of the first reporting of Minamata disease to the city health office. Experts say at least 20,000 to 30,000 people may have been affected by the poisoning.

Acute cases of Minamata disease involve severe sensory disturbance, ataxia, contraction of the visual field, convulsions and often death. Chronic cases of Minamata disease involve sensory disturbance of the extremities and many other ills. Because organic mercury crosses the placenta barrier, fetuses were poisoned in their mother's womb, leading to congenital cases of Minamata disease.

To date 2265 people have been officially certified by the government as having Minamata Disease. Over 10,000 people have applied for recognition — many of them more than once — but their applications have been rejected. Currently nearly 3800 people are applying for certification of which more than a 1000 are suing the government.

Chisso has to date paid out more than 130 billion yen in compensation, and owes nearly 170 billion in the form of principle and interest — these are bonds issued by Kumamoto prefecture backed up by the national government. The sea bed with 25ppm of mercury or more was dredged at a cost of 48 billion yen.

In September 2004, after a 22 year fight, Minamata disease victims living in the Kansai area won a Supreme Court lawsuit which legally substantiated that the Japanese government and Kumamoto prefecture were responsible along with the Chisso corporation in the cause and spread of Minamata disease. The court verdict exposed the fact that the current government criteria for certifying victims is based on erroneous medical science. Yet today, the Ministry of the Environment is on the run...not facing up to this fact. The ministry's home page is a glaring example of the Japanese government's ostrich, head-in-the-sand stance to this environmental disaster. There is a saying in Japan, "Nihon no Johshiki wa Sekai no Hijohshiki" — what is passed off as "normal" and "common sense" in Japan would not be normal or make sense abroad if exposed to the limelight of world opinion.

The reason we are holding this press conference today is that we truly believe that if the world knew what is going on in Japan regarding this environmental disaster, the Japanese government will no longer be able to ignore what it has attempted to ignore for 50 years.

What is indeed shocking is that in the 50-year history of Minamata disease the government has not once officially banned fishing in the polluted waters.

What is equally shocking is that during these 50 years the government has not once conducted a health survey (an epidemiological study) of the contaminated area to find out how many people were affected where and in what way.

The history of government inaction regarding this case is elaborated in the report you have by Nobuo Miyazawa titled, "Minamata Disease — A History of Japanese Government and Kumamoto Prefectural Irresponsibility" (Oct.15, 2001).

Clearly something is awry. The government's dual role of advancing the economic livelihood of its citizens, and protecting their health and safety is disturbingly out of balance in this case. This can also be seen regarding other issues in Japan which we can elaborate on later.

I will end my introductory remarks by quoting from Dr. Toshihide Tsuda's statement which you have on hand titled, "The Japanese Government Conceals the Actual Number of Victims in the Minamata Disease Case":

"..when the government Guidelines for designating Minamata Disease sufferers was made public by the government in 1977, absolutely no medical rationale was given for it."

"In 1985, after the Fukuoka high court verdict criticized the government criteria, and as a result the Medical Experts' Council (Igaku Senmonka Kaigi) was convened and the views of the council made public, there was still no explanation given concerning the basis for approving this standard."

"Again in 1991, the findings issued by the government's Council for Control of Environmental Pollution utilized the 1985 Medical Experts' Council opinion as grounds, and again, neither data nor reference materials were submitted."

"Whether intentional or unconscious, no one with authority and power attempts to face up to and discuss the unbridgeable gulf between reality and the fiction concocted to be reality."

"Becoming cognizant of victims as indeed being victims would be the first step in correcting this illegal conduct. However, this is not taking place even on this 50th anniversary of Minamata Disease."

[Minor adaptations to the text were made for this printed version.]