

**Voluntary Evacuation: A New Form of Struggle**  
**A Conversation with Takako Shishido by Todos Somos Japon (1)**  
**June 23, 2012, NYC**

**Takako Shishido**  
**Ayumi Hirai**  
**Sabu Kohso**  
**Yuko Tonohira**

**Yuko Tonohira:** Today in New York we are joined by Takako Shishido from Fukushima on her trip back from Rio de Janeiro. When the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant was struck by the earthquake and tsunami, followed by the series of explosions and meltdowns, Shishido-san was living in the city of Date, Fukushima Prefecture, 50km away from the plant. Last year she relocated to Sapporo City in Hokkaido with her two children and husband. As an evacuee herself, she volunteers as an organizer of the local evacuees network.

**Sabu Kohso:** Looking at the situation from outside of Japan, it seems that voluntary evacuation is such a crucial process and I am convinced that whoever can must evacuate the area affected by evident radioactivity. Here somebody's evacuation itself will have a strong impact even on those who don't need to evacuate yet, let alone those who do now. One definite thing to consider is the unstoppable spread of contamination, which will surely affect all human lives across the world, one way or another. I have a sense that there will be many many more people who follow the path of evacuation from now on. In this respect, a large network of support systems is crucial. Evacuation involves not only the efforts and determination of evacuees, but also necessitates help from those who accept the evacuees at new homes, and many other solidarity projects such as legal, mental and financial support. With this in mind, we may have an option to expand the network even overseas, to create a wider support structure, even though the immediate support must happen within Japan in the first place.

**Takako Shishido:** Yes, certainly. Right now, very few or no visible effects have been detected in the bodies of those of us who live or have lived in radioactive area since last March. It is quite likely that we have already been affected, but it is hard to confirm. Under such circumstances, many fewer people are voluntarily evacuating than we feel necessary at the moment. We can't determine what will be sufficient, since nobody knows what is and will be happening to our bodies. When it becomes necessary, however, it will be very difficult for people to make an immediate decision to evacuate – especially if there is nowhere to go or no one to accept them. So it is surely important to have a system of support to accept those who want to evacuate at any instant in the future. If the state of the Fukushima Daiichi and radioactive contamination worsens, the entire Eastern Japan may face total devastation. Therefore one of the vital measures to be taken is for the State to acknowledge the right to evacuate for those who feel it necessary. It is important to create a consensus for this right so that we can say evacuation is not wrong. If many people offer their support for this, it would be so much easier for those who are living with unbearable anxiety to make their decision to get out. This is such a relief for many, and it will be much needed from now on.

**YT:** Sabu, what you just said was to set up some kind of system to accept evacuees even outside of Japan?

**SK:** Yes, first of all, a network within Japan is most crucial, but at this point the disaster is proving to be unprecedentedly huge, and the nuclear accident itself hasn't been resolved. Some point out grave risks involved even in living in the Tokyo area. It is a matter of historical magnitude that Tokyo, a world metropolis, might need to be evacuated. And to have people move out of Tokyo cannot be imagined within the scope of Japan alone; this could develop into a global refugee situation. So there is a possibility that we will need to create a support movement based on borderless networking.

**TS:** Yes, it would be too late to form a support system when people are already trying to evacuate and move out of their homes. People would feel more comfortable migrating if there were good support system and organizations already in place. We panicked when the reactors exploded because there was no such evacuation system. In this on-going situation we can expect anything could happen. So any preparation will not hurt. Even if the efforts and practices may not see immediate results, they won't be wasted for they will be needed when similar things happen elsewhere in the future. Today the core of such a support system consists of the so-called "support organizations" which are basically run by the common people. The support group in Hokkaido however tends to have many useful connections to the administration and municipal offices; community organizations and the administration are able to work together. Since the voices of evacuees are heard in exchanges with various sectors, things can work very well. We feel we are receiving significant support from the administration when we see officials help us, walking the fine line between the legal and extra-legal. The administration and the community groups have different capacities and each has separate agendas. When the two capabilities are combined, it makes a strong system for supporting the evacuees. It is extremely crucial to share capabilities in different places--not just in Hokkaido. In addition, I've been trying to involve many different types of people like those who can address mental needs, legal needs and so on. I think it is necessary to stay connected with as many people as possible.

**SK:** When we initially got together to begin Todos Somos Japon as a global solidarity project, with Yuko, Marina (Sitrin) and myself, we talked about the potentiality of these needs emerging. Our conversation didn't go into much detail at first, but we did think about such possibilities. Since Marina has been involved in many social movements in Latin America, she envisioned several ideas; for example, connecting with the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) in Brazil to start working with certain groups and municipalities, even on a small scale. In another instance, the government of Bolivia might actually listen to us if we try connecting with them. Any of these things we can't predict, but we need to slowly examine who is willing and able to work with us, as we go on. It may take several years, though.

**YT:** In fact, if we think within the frame of the US, we may limit possibilities.

**SK:** Yes, what I imagine is to approach strongly-organized and well-mobilized social movements or even certain governments in Latin America.

**TS:** I am actually sensing something like the second wave of emigration to Latin America. For that matter, their invitation to Brazil may well have included a tacit message that Japanese evacuees could move there. Mr. Sato\* told us that he wanted us to see what kind of place Brazil was. I felt that he wanted us to see in our own eye that Brazil was a great place and we could migrate if we wanted to. In fact, immediately after the disaster, there were several offers from different governments for people to relocate there. Next time anything similar is offered to us, the situation will have become much worse than it is now- that kind of networking is very necessary.

\*Johsei Sato: A second generation Japanese born in Brazil, who runs a Buddhist temple in Brasilia. He

has invited Ms. Shishido to Rio+20 People's Forum in the summer of 2012 to discuss the current situation and spread the voice of Fukushima.

**YT:** Yes, there are already big Japanese immigrant communities in Latin America especially in Brazil, so in reality it would be easier for people evacuating from Japan to adjust to a new life, with familiar language and even the food culture already in place.



**TS:** Even within Japan, I have learned about some communities inviting those who have given up farming in contaminated areas, so that they can start farming again. But farmers cannot easily give up on their own land. They cannot simply move out of the land they have kept for generations, no matter how toxic it may be. One of Mr. Sakamoto's photographs\* from Fukushima shows a former rice field, kept for the last three hundred years, now taken over by those tall weeds called goldenrod. Once goldenrod grows in a field, it can no longer function as a rice paddy. Even in this desperation, some long to go back to their land inside exclusion zones, and those who have not been restricted by the government's safety regulations are trying their best to continue producing and harvesting. But I wonder that eventually many rice farmers will have to abandon their fields. Especially rice paddies closer to mountains get more damage. Since Japanese soil has a clay-like consistency, it is harder for contamination to spread. But still, some products have been banned for high-level radiation. Thus, the farmers today are forced to determine how to deal with the situation when their products are contaminated. For them it is not easy to simply evacuate.

Takumi Sakamoto: a photo journalist and writer reporting the devastation of the nuclear disaster in 2011. His photographs from the exclusion zones around Fukushima Daiichi include abandoned cattle, slaughter ground and former rice field that has since been abandoned.

**SK:** I see. If I put myself in their shoes, it wouldn't be an easy thing to do. Just by imagining abandoning your house. In this respect, Shiro Yabu\* may be an extreme example.

\*Shiro Yabu: a prominent activist and writer who evacuated from Tokyo to Nagoya immediately after the nuclear disaster.

**TS:** He can write his texts wherever he goes. If your job doesn't restrict where you live, you can be mobile and move more easily, especially if you have an established profession. My husband, for example, is a high school teacher, but he had to give up his job since we relocated. Then the question is whether he can raise his children without a stable job. If not, your life would be equally devastated; you can no longer maintain your livelihood. So what you do is to weigh the benefits of giving up financial stability against the need of protecting your children from radiation. As a result, many cases of evacuation are limited to mothers and children, leaving the father behind to keep his job.

**SK:** Under such circumstance, people would definitely choose to remain in Fukushima while trying their best to avoid exposure to radiation. However, if the authorities give more strict figures to clarify possible health risks in areas wider than those currently under restriction, there will be more people who want to evacuate, I suppose.

**YT:** I agree. I think the biggest crime is that the authorities never properly announced that this was no longer a place humans could live. Then on the other hand, there is the people's monitoring movement that prompted some municipal offices to start working towards protection of the community against radiation. Do you think there still are chances for the government to shift their position on that?

**TS:** Well, the Japanese government's consensus has been that humans can live outside a 20 kilometer radius.

**YT:** So that's probably not going to change?

**TS:** The state has finally acknowledged that some parts of the exclusion zone will forever be inhabitable. But that zone is way too small in our opinion. In fact the red zone around Fukushima Daiichi is much smaller than the zone around Chernobyl set by the Ukrainian and Belarusian governments. People all over Japan, let alone those in Fukushima, still don't know how to accept this fact.

**SK:** Everyone seems to be stepping carefully in trial and error in this new situation. Shishido-san, at your public speech yesterday, you talked about the decision to leave or stay: that you would respect each one's idea and decision. I was really moved by your consideration. Can you say a few more words?

**TS:** The matter of fact is that nobody knows what's right. Many people are confronting the problem, only to realize that they have never dealt with such an unprecedented situation. Nobody had ever had to choose a way to survive on a daily basis. But now people are continuing to ask themselves what is best for them, and when they make their own decisions, each decision has its own value for the life of each. Right now in most places, people are still arguing against and rejecting each other's ideas: "you are poisoned by pro-evacuation scholars," or "you are influenced by pro-radiation safety scholars." Meanwhile, there's no way to foresee who is going to be proven right; it may take decades to know the truth. Then it's up to each of us to determine our own course of action. First of all, we all need to

recognize and understand the each other. Our ultimate goals are not far from each other – ultimately they are all for abolishing nuclear energy while protecting our children in safer places. We finally agree that we want to lead ourselves to a better future. Everybody I talk to comes to the same idea. So we should all be able to work on needs, while supporting each other, saying: “good luck on your decision, though I'm going other way, but we can still raise our voice together toward the areas we agree on.” In reality, however, people are telling each other that you are not right, everything you're doing is wrong. Some people think what they do is the only way out. But the matter is not simple. So I say: let's try to acknowledge the people who want to evacuate but cannot. Not all of them think radiation is okay. Some people decided to stay even fully recognizing the danger of radiation. There are others who stand by the 'radiation is safe' position and work on reconstruction of their towns. But none of us can decide what's right for everybody, so all we can do is to do what we can do and say what we can say. If we find a definite resolution at some point, we can then start over by making necessary changes of orientation.

Right as I say this though, I must admit that I am betraying my true belief: I want everybody to evacuate. But would it bring any solution by pushing my idea onto those people who cannot evacuate? I doubt it would. So as I said, each of us should do what we can do and say what we can say. Yet again, if some health effects become apparent, I am sure that I will regret my tolerance. But that is the only solution I can come up with at the moment.

**SK:** It seems to me, however, that mental or political pressure and regionalist imposition are more intense on those who leave the community than on those who stay.

**TS:** I think so. For example, the levels of pressure are very different between those imposed upon compulsory evacuees and voluntary (self) evacuees. For us self-evacuees, there are accusations such as “why can't you listen to what the state says?” The state tells us that everything is all right. Especially pressures from the older generation are tough on us: a grandmother speaking of her daughter-in-law complains, “what a wife who opposes the government.” This is because older generations are more attached to their land and find it difficult to leave. Also, often times husbands have grown up and lived long in the same town and have many friends who share strong connections to the town. But wives in many cases have come to the household from out-of-town and have an easier time being mobile. Therefore, we (mothers) often get harsher social pressures. It's only natural that those who wish to evacuate but are unable to do so feel jealous of those who actually can evacuate. But we can't really blame them. Feelings of jealousy are spreading rapidly and intensely in Fukushima today, especially towards the people from the exclusion zone who have received compensation from the government for their relocation. Some people claim: "lucky you, getting the money," but there is nothing "lucky" about the lives of people who have been deprived of their land and subsistence, not knowing what to do. Sadly, such feelings are persistent among Fukushima residents. Lately it has been determined that certain compensation is to be offered both to some voluntary evacuees and some of those who remain in Fukushima. I hear that some are becoming extremely jealous and even panicked by the order of distribution of compensation. It is very disheartening to see the people driven into a corner to this degree. At the same time, those who remain in Fukushima are also accused of "prioritizing the economy and neglecting the health of the children." This isn't true, either. Many people are doing their best to protect the lives of their children within the condition of having to remain in Fukushima. If that's not the case, why would people bother to buy bottled water and choose safe vegetables every single day? People are trying their best to minimize children's exposure to radiation. Even some indoor playgrounds have been built. How could anyone say that people in Fukushima are sacrificing their children for financial profit, or that they aren't brave enough to evacuate? This is very cruel, I think.

**YT:** For example, I heard about a daughter of a person from Fukushima who's very active in the work of evacuation and compensation: after they evacuated their home in Fukushima, the daughter stopped going to school, protesting that she never wanted to part with her friends back home. After a while, the mother finally gave up and determined to move back to Fukushima. I realized that warning people to make their life decisions is not easy, when it is based solely on health hazard.

**TS:** It is true that the stress from evacuation has negative effects on our bodies. I mean: although I'm totally against the idea held by the group in support of radiation 'safety' that 'stress is worse than radiation', some aspect of it is true. There certainly are effects of radiation, but we won't see them immediately. It may take years until we see them in the concrete. And during these coming years, there will be innumerable people who are mentally drained. Here we see a tendency among us of having to choose one of two options: psychological damage or radiological effects. It is fundamentally wrong that people have to face such decisions. Therefore, the root of this forced decision and forced care has to be terminated; we must never let the condition that imposes the choice -- nuclear power-- persist. How can you not go crazy having to make such intense life-and-death decisions every single day? How can you be living and doubting if you can breath the air around you? So many people, including myself, have had to adjust to breathing less, and haven't breathed deeply until we moved to Hokkaido.

**YT:** Also, thinking about why these people are forced to internalize such sufferings as if they were their own problems, I believe its root goes back to what TEPCO caused and the state's irresponsibility that scattered all these problems onto the people. We recently learned that Fukushima Nuclear Disaster Plaintiffs had gathered to bring criminal charges against government officials and TEPCO executives. I have been shaken up by their effort and determination. Shishido-san, how do you see the effort for the lawsuit?

**TS:** That is the group headed by the prominent antinuclear activist, Ruiko Muto\*. While I was helping them hand out fliers in Sapporo City, I learned that there had been so little judicial intervention and nothing would happen unless the people actively work on the lawsuit themselves. For example, there have been so many criminal investigations into various cases of business corruption, but nothing has been done against TEPCO. This is an abnormal state. We must motivate and move the judicial system, and in order to do so, bringing suit against the criminals ourselves is most effective. We need to pursue responsibilities of the government and TEPCO. And after all, we also need to hold ourselves accountable for our own indifference on nuclear energy that has lasted till now.

\* Ruiko Muto has been involved in anti-nuclear activism since Chernobyl. The Fukushima Daiichi catastrophe forced her to close her café in Miharu-cho, Fukushima.

**SK:** This is an extremely multi-faceted struggle!

**TS:** That's why what each can do in her capacity comes to be very important. If you think, for instance, project (A) needs to be done now, you must gather the like-minded people. While at the same time, project (B) is better handled by a different group of people, with whom you can act on that. What we need are such loosely connected networks. If you determine one way, you won't be able to rise up again when that single path is cut off. Meanwhile, improvising and working as we have been with flexibility, our ideas have been gradually transforming since day 1 of the nuclear disaster. This is how fifty thousand people have come to gather in front of the prime minister's residence in Tokyo. For instance, while calling for "no nukes" may put many people off, "elimination of nuclear energy for protection of our children" may gain wider support. It's important to stretch the base wider. We have lawsuits and we have individual compensation -- we need to work in parallel on these issues.

**YT:** It seems like multiple issues are simultaneously falling onto each individual as their tasks. Many people are in such stressful circumstances.

**TS:** I think so too, and that's why some people are unable to catch up and stop thinking. Many people had never been so political nor so intensely forced to take their lives into their own their hands. Ordinary life suddenly disappeared one day. This plain fact alone hurts people, and it's natural that many are giving up thinking. But we should never torment nor ridicule them that they aren't thinking anything.

This is just the beginning. I hope many more people will take into consideration how to connect different individuals and to connect with each other effectively. One person has two hands - each one of us could connect to two more people, and so on. I think this is how we can make our project bigger, gradually. I don't believe there will be a Revolution - at least in the social climate in Japan today. But a slow transition, if not a rapid one, is definitely necessary, though I'm not sure if we can continue to catch up with the situation we are facing.

**YT:** We can argue how we define Revolution, though.

**Ayumi Hirai:** A slow transition can be a part of Revolution.

**TS:** We probably won't be overthrowing the government. Then who would take care of all the political affairs related to the disaster?

**SK:** Perhaps there is a stance that the administration has to be overthrown first. But a revolution can involve various processes and can happen slowly as well. First of all, one needs to protect her own life. And her family's lives. Think about communities. Work on legal action too. And to top it off, work on the anti-nuclear campaign. Facing so many objectives, my brain would probably burst out and stop thinking.

**TS:** One of the things I heard many times is: "are you going to save only yourself? What's the point? We are all irradiated anyway." I would say: what is wrong with saving myself? Only thereafter, we can say: "let US save ourselves!"

**YT:** I agree, I think that the basis is protecting 'myself and my loved ones' in the first place.

**TS:** But the social trend tends to oppose the idea quite strongly. So we need to change the trend to make people understand that they CAN protect themselves on their own.

**AH:** Hearing this reminds me of the crucial fact that the people are in the state wherein they are given their lives rather than living them by and for themselves, wherein their bodies and spirits are bound up and tied onto a big power.

**TS:** After all, we have lived according to a set of rules which someone else had decided for us. For instance, my mother-in-law is someone who would insist that evacuation isn't something you should decide on your own. I opposed her strongly and questioned who on earth should decide; aren't you entitled to have your own opinion? Who else, if not I, will make decisions for my life? In the end, we are all faced with the question: what each of us wants to do. This nuclear disaster has made many of us face ourselves with this severity, for the first time ever.

**SK:** In this respect, if I may say, there is a wonderful element to it, too. It implies: 'people have been given their lives by some external power,' but now a new subjectivity is rising. And this subjectivity is completely different from one of the Japanese in the traditional sense. In this process, there is a clear sense of new subjectivation by way of making one's own choices. Of course, taking the reality of the disaster into consideration, I cannot really say it's 'great', but if there is anything positive coming out of this apocalyptic situation, it is that people are beginning to make decisions on their own.

**TS:** In the state where many of us were suddenly thrown to the other side of our thinkable reality zone, we found ourselves in shock, incapable of acting. So how to stand up again from the state of shock is becoming very crucial. Thus we would like to see all of us making our life decisions by ourselves. What has happened to us can happen to everybody else - this isn't just a problem in Fukushima.

But in Japan now, I do see this issue treated as something of the past and something particular to Fukushima. So unless we change this mental climate, we can't make a movement big enough to change this situation. Last and foremost, considering the on-going damage caused by the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster, I can never take this situation positively. I have seen people be 'thankful' for what has happened - they are happy that it has brought awareness, that they can connect with many others. When I heard someone saying 'thanks to the nuclear accident,' I was taken aback and couldn't possibly agree with it. I want people to keep in mind that the magnitude of the event is unprecedented -- such is what is happening around us now.

To be continued.