

Japan WWII uranium miner questions peaceful use of nuclear power

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ISHIKAWA, Fukushima — A former elementary school principal who was once mobilized for uranium mining during World War II for Japan's development of nuclear weapons questions the peaceful use of nuclear power amid the ongoing nuclear crisis.

Kiwamu Ariga, 80, a former elementary school principal in Ishikawa, Fukushima Prefecture, has gathered testimonies by those who were engaged in uranium ore mining in the town as mobilized students toward the end of the war.

Last year, Ariga formed a citizens' group to pass on the stories of the war to future generations. Though he had believed the peaceful use of nuclear energy was inevitable, he changed his mind following the accident at the Fukushima nuclear plant. "I believe we have come to a point where we should review the peaceful use of atomic power from scratch," Ariga said.

The town of Ishikawa — located about 60 kilometers southwest of the disaster-crippled Fukushima No. 1 Nuclear Power Plant — has been home to rare element minerals since before the war. The then Imperial Japanese Army, which was developing atomic weapons toward the end of the war, mobilized some 120 third-year students at a private middle school in Ishikawa for uranium mining, including 14-year-old Ariga, in April 1945.

"All we did was to enter the mountain, dig minerals and carried them in baskets," recalls Eiji Fujisawa, 80, Ariga's classmate who also lives in Ishikawa.

In May of 1945, several engineer officers visited the mine and told the students, "If we make a bomb using the rocks you are mining, we could instantly wipe out New York," according to Ariga.

The amount of uranium mined in the town is said to have been too small to extract the necessary quantity for producing an atomic bomb. The Army's technical research institute, which had commissioned the development of atomic weapons to what is now Riken in Tokyo, concluded in June 1945 that even the United States would not be able to develop nuclear weapons and abandoned the idea of producing atomic bombs.

The United States, however, dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima on Aug. 6 and Nagasaki on Aug. 9 that year, causing enormous devastation to the two cities. Ariga eventually became a teacher and started passing down

his wartime experiences of mining uranium to younger generations in the hope that the tragedy of war will never be repeated.

In 1971 and 1982, the Fukushima No. 1 and No. 2 nuclear power plants started operations, respectively. Ariga had long thought the use of nuclear energy for power generation and in the medical sector was unavoidable, but the accident at the No. 1 plant in March this year prompted him to change his mind.

"Despite the fact that Japan suffered the tragedies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, we have allowed the use of nuclear power on the grounds that it is for peaceful purposes. I think the nuclear accident occurred because we underestimated (the danger of) nuclear power," said Ariga.

For Ariga, the memory of the wartime period when people were told Japan would absolutely win the war, which proved contrary, and the postwar myth that nuclear power plants are absolutely safe, which was overturned by the Fukushima accident, overlap each other. He is planning to hold a meeting of his story-telling group this summer, hoping that he could convey the horror of atomic bombs and discuss nuclear power generation with participants.

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