

Japan: Nuke crisis refugee fought losing 18-year legal battle against Fukushima plant

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NIIGATA — In 1992, Sanzo Onoda and his fellow plaintiffs lost their 18-year legal battle to have one of Fukushima's nuclear power plants shuttered. He and 400 others originally filed the case against the construction of the Fukushima No. 2 Nuclear Power Plant in 1975, pointing to the dangers of a catastrophe in the event of a major earthquake or tsunami.

The retired high school teacher, who continued to plead fruitlessly with plant operator Tokyo Electric Power Co. (TEPCO) over the safety of the coastal reactors even after the case was dismissed, is now a nuclear crisis refugee here, some 200 kilometers from his home.

"We have no idea when the next major earthquake will come," says Onoda, 73. "Now is the time to rid ourselves of our dependence on nuclear power."

In 1975, when the national government gave permission for the building of the No. 1 reactor at the Fukushima No. 2 plant, Onoda decided to take legal action, thinking, "After building the No. 1 plant, TEPCO's going to construct another one even though it hasn't yet guaranteed its safety. We are not guinea pigs." He collected a total of 401 plaintiffs, his coworkers among them, for the class action suit to have the building permit revoked.

The first court decision, handed down in 1984 by the Fukushima District Court, concluded that the government's safety evaluations were reasonable, and dismissed the case. On appeal in 1990 the Sendai High Court also rejected the suit, citing the proportion of the electricity supply provided by nuclear plants and stating, "In the end, we can do nothing but move ahead with nuclear power." Finally, in 1992, the Supreme Court added its own dismissal.

And then, on March 11 this year, came one of the most powerful earthquakes ever recorded, and with it the ocean's murderous assault upon the land. Onoda was in coastal Minamisoma, Fukushima Prefecture, to have his car fixed when the quake struck. The ensuing tsunami waters reached about mid-wheel before Onoda hit the accelerator and sped to higher ground.

When he got home, he found the roof of his house had collapsed. He spent the night in his car, and when he awoke the town's emergency broadcast system was urging everyone to evacuate. There had been an explosion at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant. The nuclear disaster Onoda had always feared was now unfolding just down the coast.

Onoda spent about a month living with his eldest daughter in the prefectural capital before moving into public housing in distant Niigata to be close to his mother, who suffers from dementia and had been admitted to a hospital in Tokamachi, Niigata Prefecture.

On June 14, he donned one of those now iconic white protective suits and made a one-time visit to his house in the nuclear crisis exclusion zone, but because of the damage to his roof rain water had soaked everything inside.

"The rain was contaminated with radioactive substances, so I couldn't have used anything even if I'd

dried it out," Onoda says. He took only the most essential items and abandoned the rest.

About the suit he and his fellow plaintiffs filed 36 years ago, Onoda says, "There was no other way to tell people about the dangers of nuclear power but to go to court. When I think about what might have been had the judges opened their ears to what we were saying, I feel so disappointed."

By the time Onoda's anti-nuclear plant suit reached its final appeal, there were only 17 plaintiffs left. Some have become nuclear refugees like Onoda, while he has been unable to contact others since the disaster.

"To avoid another nuclear tragedy like this, we need to come up with a plan to switch to natural energy sources as soon as we can," Onoda says, thinking of the Fukushima home he may never see again.

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* <http://mdn.mainichi.jp/mdnnews/national/news/20110724p2a00m0na009000c.html>