

Scarecrows outnumber people in dying Japan town

By Elaine Kurtenbach
AP Business Writer

NAGORO, Japan — A village deep in the rugged mountains of southern Japan once was home to hundreds of families. Now, only 35 people remain, outnumbered three-to-one by scarecrows that Tsukimi Ayano crafted to help fill the days and replace neighbors who died or moved away.

At age 65, Ayano is one of the younger residents of Nagoro. She moved back from Osaka to look after her 85-year-old father after decades away.

"They bring back memories," Ayano said of the life-sized dolls crowded into corners of her farmhouse home, perched on fences and trees, huddled side-by-side at a produce stall, the bus stop — anywhere a living person might stop to take a rest.

"That old lady used to come and chat and drink tea. That old man used to love to drink saké and tell stories. It reminds me of the old times, when they were still alive and well," she said.

Even more than its fading status as an export superpower, Japan's dwindling population may be its biggest challenge. More than 10,000 towns and villages in Japan are depopulated, the homes and infrastructure crumbling as the countryside empties thanks to the falling birthrate and rapid aging.

First the jobs go. Then the schools. Eventually, the electricity meters stop.

Neither Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's ruling Liberal Democratic Party nor any of its rivals have figured out how to "revive localities," an issue that has perplexed Japanese leaders for decades.

But local communities are trying various strategies for attracting younger residents, slowing if not reversing their decline. In Kamiyama, a farming community closer to the regional capital, community organizers have mapped out plans for attracting artists and high-tech companies.



Nagoro is more typical of the thousands of communities that are turning into ghost towns or at best, open-air museums, frozen in time.

The one-street town is mostly abandoned, its shops and homes permanently shuttered.

The closure of the local elementary school two years ago was the last straw. Ayano unlocks the door and guides visitors through spotless classrooms populated with scarecrow students and teachers.

When she returned to her hometown 13 years ago, Ayano tried farming. Thinking her radish seeds may have been eaten by crows, she decided to make some scarecrows. Now there are more than 100 scattered around Nagoro and nearby towns.

Like handcarved Buddhist sculptures, each has its own whimsical expression. Some sleep, their eyelids permanently shut. Others cuddle toddler scarecrows or man the plows and hoes.

Ayano brings one along for company on her 90-minute drive to buy groceries in the nearest big town. But most remain behind, to be photographed and marvelled at by tourists who detour through the winding mountain roads.

"If I hadn't made these scarecrows, people would just drive right by," said Ayano.

The plight of Japan's countryside is partly a consequence of the country's economic success. As Japan grew increasingly affluent after World War II, younger Japanese flooded into the cities to fill jobs in factories and service industries, leaving their elders to tend small farms.

Greater Tokyo, with more than 37 million people, and Osaka-Kobe, with 11.5 million, account for nearly 40 percent of the country's 127 million people.

"There's been this huge sucking sound as the countryside is emptied out," said Joel Cohen, a professor at Columbia University's Laboratory of Populations.

Japan's population began to decline in 2010 from a peak of 128 million. Without a drastic increase in the birthrate or a loosening of the staunch Japanese resistance to immigration, it is forecast to fall to 108 million by 2050 and to 87 million by 2060. By then, four in 10 Japanese will be more than 65 years old.

The population of Miyoshi, which is the town closest to Nagoro, fell from 45,340 in 1985 to about 27,000 last year. A quarter of its population is more than 75 years old. To

SCARECROWS AS STAND-INS. Tsukimi Ayano speaks as she stitches a scarecrow girl by an outdoor hearth at her home in the mountainous village of Nagoro, Tokushima prefecture, southern Japan. The village deep in the rugged mountains of southern Japan once was home to hundreds of families. Now, only 35 people remain, outnumbered three-to-one by scarecrows that Ayano crafted to help fill the days and replace neighbors who died or moved away. (AP Photo/Elaine Kurtenbach)

entice residents to have more children, the town began offering free nursery care for third children, free diapers and formula to age two, and free healthcare through junior high school.

"The way to stop this is to get people to have more babies," said mayor Seiichi Kurokawa. "Apart from that, we need for people to return here or move here."

But it's not an easy sell, despite the fresh air and abundant space.

"You can't just grab people by the necks like kittens and drag them here," Kurokawa said.

Getting residents of half-empty towns to accept newcomers can also be a challenge.

In Kamiyama, to the east, the town still struggles to convince owners who are often relatives living in distant cities to open up abandoned homes for rent or renovation, said Shinya Ominami, chairman of a civic group that has led efforts to revive the town.

In a briefing for potential investors and visiting officials, Ominami shows a slide of the town's shopping street, dotted with houses that are empty, and then another with some of the buildings filled with new businesses — a bistro, a design studio, an IT incubation hub.

"Once we accept this is the reality, we can figure out how to cope with it," Ominami said.

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South Korea rejects idea of sharing Olympics with Japan

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — A South Korean governor has rejected an International Olympic Committee (IOC) proposal to move the bobsled and luge events for the 2018 Winter Games in Pyeongchang to another country to save money.

Relocating the events to other destinations wouldn't help save costs because Pyeongchang has already begun building its venue for sliding sports, Gangwon province governor Choi Moon-soon said in a televised news conference.

"Sharing the competition with another city is not an option we can consider. The South Korean people would never accept it," Choi said.

Gangwon province governs Pyeongchang, a ski resort town near South Korea's eastern coast.

The IOC, which is trying to cut costs for hosts, had requested that South Korean organizers move the sports to another city to prevent leaving Pyeongchang with a venue that will have little use after the games.

According to the IOC, relocating the bobsled, luge, and skeleton events would save \$120 million in construction costs and \$3.5 million in yearly maintenance costs.

The IOC said a dozen different bobsled and luge tracks around the world could step in to host the sliding competitions for the 2018 Games if they are moved out of Pyeongchang.

One option is Nagano, Japan, which hosted the 1998 Winter Games, although moving the competitions there would raise criticism because of the difficult relations between the neighbors over their history.

South Korea's Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism expects the total cost of the Pyeongchang Olympics to exceed 11 trillion won (\$10 billion).

Hong Kong police arrest 209 protesters, demolish main camp

Continued from page 3

police warnings to leave the protest zone to avoid being arrested, but dozens of students, pro-democracy lawmakers, and others, including middle-aged and elderly supporters, remained sitting on the street. They chanted "I want true democracy" and "We will be back," but offered no resistance as they were taken away one by one, many lifted off the ground.

Among those arrested were pro-democracy media mogul Jimmy Lai, pop singer Denise Ho, veteran pro-democracy activist Martin Lee, and pro-democracy legislators including Albert Ho. Leaders from the Hong Kong Federation of Students and Scholarism, two student groups that have played key roles in organizing the protests, were also taken to police stations.

Police also arrested four activists from radical political parties and a student group at their homes December 10 and 11 on suspicion of inciting others to join unauthorized assemblies.

The sprawling encampment in Hong Kong's Admiralty section, next to city government headquarters, was the focal point of what became known as the "Umbrella Movement" because of the protesters' use of umbrellas to fend off police pepper spray.

Police had cleared out a second protest site in the blue-collar Mong Kok neighborhood late last month in an aggressive two-day operation that sparked several nights of clashes and saw about 160 people arrested. A smaller protest site in the Causeway Bay district remains untouched, but police have vowed to move on it soon.



The protesters reject Beijing's restrictions on the election of the city's top leader scheduled for 2017, but failed to win any concessions from Hong Kong's government.

Protesters promised to keep up their civil disobedience campaign against the government using new tactics. Many said the movement has sparked an awakening among the wider population.

"People will come back again, they will come back with stronger force," said Alex Chow, secretary general of the Hong Kong Federation of Students, who was arrested.

Pro-democracy lawmakers said they would pressure the government in the legislature by blocking funding requests and the government's electoral reforms.

"A dialogue can only happen when we vote down the coming political reform package," said pro-democracy lawmaker Lee Cheuk-yan, who was the last to be arrested.

Hong Kong government officials have

OCCUPATION ENDS. A woman in a Santa costume delivers shopping leaflets in the Causeway Bay shopping district outside an occupied area by pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong on Friday, December 12, 2014. Traffic was back to normal in Hong Kong's financial district after authorities demolished a protest camp at the heart of the city's two-and-a-half month pro-democracy movement. (AP Photo/Kin Cheung)

seemed more open to resuming talks as the movement drew to a close, but the chances of a breakthrough are slim given the wide differences between the two sides. Chief secretary Carrie Lam, the No. 2 official, said she is open to discussions with the students.

Protester Andy Chu, who was among those waiting to be arrested, said the movement "will move on to the next stage. It's not about occupying the streets anymore. It can be about paying attention to other political issues such as social welfare and housing issues."

The clearing operation began the morning of December 11 when workers enforcing a court order removed some barricades on the edge of the protest site. Police then sealed off the area and moved in to clear out the rest of it.

They tore down hundreds of tents and canopies that served as supply stations, leaving them in mangled heaps among discarded newspapers, flip-flops, cardboard boxes, and umbrellas.

Police also razed a study area made up of tables and chairs and ripped down messages of support pasted to a nearby wall. At least 20 dump trucks with grapples arms picked up the debris.

Associated Press journalist Wendy Tang contributed to this report.