

Japan marks third anniversary of tsunami disaster

By Mari Yamaguchi
The Associated Press

TOKYO — Prime Minister Shinzo Abe pledged to boost rebuilding efforts as Japan marked the third anniversary of a devastating earthquake and tsunami that left nearly 19,000 people dead, destroyed coastal communities, and triggered a nuclear crisis.

Japan has struggled to rebuild towns and villages and to clean up radiation from the meltdowns at the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear power plant. Reconstruction plans are finally taking shape, but shortages of skilled workers and materials are delaying the work.

The triple disasters known in Japan as 3/11 killed 15,884 people and left 2,636 unaccounted for on its northeastern coast. The country has earmarked 25 trillion yen (\$250 billion) for reconstruction through March 2016.

Three years later, nearly 270,000 people remain displaced from their homes, including many from Fukushima prefecture who may never be able to return home due to radioactive contamination.

During a ceremony in Tokyo, officials and representatives of the survivors offered a minute of silence to mark the moment, at 2:46pm, when the magnitude 9.0 earthquake struck off the Tohoku coast. It was the strongest quake recorded in Japan's history.

Abe has visited disaster-hit areas regularly since taking office in late 2012, and said he has seen signs of progress. Farming and fishing resumed in some areas, and some people have moved to public housing from shelters, he said, promising to do more.

"We must further speed up the recon-



REMEMBRANCE EVENTS. A woman prays for the victims of the March 11, 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Minamisoma, Fukushima prefecture, north-eastern Japan, on March 11, 2014. Japan marked the third anniversary of the earthquake and tsunami that killed 15,884 people and left more than 2,600 unaccounted for in vast areas of its northern coast. (AP Photo/Koji Sasahara)

struction so that everyone affected by the disasters can return to ordinary life as soon as possible," Abe, wearing a dark formal suit, said during the solemn ceremony.

Abe has promised to move hundreds of communities along the ravaged coast to higher ground to avoid future tsunamis, and build thousands more public housing units within a year in Iwate and Miyagi prefectures.

In Fukushima, reconstruction has lagged further behind in some areas because of the nuclear disaster.

Several towns are still off limits due to high radiation, and disaster-hit houses remain untouched.

The plant has stabilized substantially, but is still plagued by frequent leaks of radioactive water and other mishaps, triggering concern about whether it's really under control. The leaks are hampering the plant's decommissioning, which is expected to take about 40 years.

Yukari Tanaka, a resident of Futaba town, where the Fukushima Dai-ichi plant is located, told people at the ceremony she couldn't look for her father after the tsunami because they were ordered to evacuate. Weeks later, her father was found dead under the roof of their tsunami-toppled house, she said.

"I never forget how I regretted that I had to evacuate, leaving my father behind," Tanaka said.

Emperor Akihito, who also attended the ceremony, said that his heart breaks when he thinks of the Fukushima residents who have no idea if they can ever return home.

"Many disaster survivors are still experiencing difficulties. It is important that all people of Japan unite their hearts and stand by each other for a long period so that they can live without losing their hopes and in good health," Akihito said.

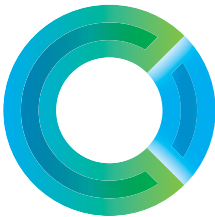
Abe, who still supports nuclear as a key power source and is pushing to export nuclear technology despite the crisis, only



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