

Elders Offer Help at Japan's Crippled Reactor

(from the NY Times, 6.27.2011)

TOKYO — By any measure, the thousands of people toiling to cool the crippled nuclear reactors in Fukushima are engaged in jobs that the Japanese consider *kitanai*, *kitsui* and *kiken*, or dirty, difficult and dangerous.

Seemingly against logic, Yasuteru Yamada, 72, is eager for the chance to take part. After seeing hundreds of younger men on television struggle to control the damage at the Daiichi power plant, Mr. Yamada struck on an idea: Recruit other older engineers and other specialists to help tame the rogue reactors.

Not only do they have some of the skills needed, but because of their advanced age, they are at less risk of getting cancer and other diseases that develop slowly as a result of exposure to high levels of radiation. Their volunteering would spare younger Japanese from dangers that could leave them childless, or worse.

“We have to contain this accident, and for that, someone should do the work,” said Mr. Yamada, a retired plant engineer who had worked for Sumitomo Metal Industries. “It would benefit society if the older generation took the job because we will get less damage from working there.”

Weeks after the devastating earthquake and tsunami struck, he and Nobuhiro Shiotani, a childhood friend who is also an engineer, formed the Skilled Veterans Corps in early April. They sent out thousands of e-mails and letters, and even set up a Twitter account. On his [blog](http://bouhatsusoshi.jp/english), bouhatsusoshi.jp/english, Mr. Yamada called on people over age 60 who have “the physical

strength and experience to bear the burden of this front-line work.”

The response was instant. About 400 people have volunteered, including a singer, a cook and an 82-year-old man. Some 1,200 others have offered support, while donations have topped 4.3 million yen, or \$54,000. His blog has been translated into 12 languages.

Although Mr. Yamada, a soft-spoken cancer survivor, started with a simple goal, he has triggered a much wider debate about the role of the elderly in [Japan](#), the meaning of volunteerism and the growing reality that the Tokyo Electric Power Company, which owns the reactors, will face an increasingly difficult time recruiting workers. Some experts expect that Japan will ultimately import laborers to help with the cleanup. More than 3,000 workers, many of them poorly paid part-timers, are at the Daiichi site. Already, several have suffered heat stroke and nine have absorbed more than their legal limit of radiation. Dozens of workers have stopped showing up.

Mr. Yamada and his group have been described as selfless patriots surrendering for the greater good, mindless kooks willing to throw themselves in harm’s way, or pensioners with too much leisure time. The descriptions miss the point, according to Mr. Shiotani, who had a more practical idea in mind.

“Nuclear power plants are the brainchild of scientists and engineers,” he said. “They created this mess, and they have to fix

it.”

In conditions this dangerous, wanting to help and being allowed to help are different things. Some lawmakers initially scoffed at the volunteers, including Goshi Hosono, an aide to Prime Minister Naoto Kan, who told reporters last month that the work in Fukushima did not yet require a “suicide corps.”

“It is very precious that they sacrifice their lives and volunteer to resolve this situation,” Mr. Hosono later explained. But “they are at a certain age, so we don’t want them to get sick after working in such a dangerous environment with full face masks.”

But in a country starved for feel-good stories, the Skilled Veterans Corps has captured the hearts of many. Requests for interviews have poured in from around the world. Politicians have slowly come on board. On June 6, Mr. Yamada met Banri Kaieda, the minister of economy, trade and industry, who promised to help the volunteers before their “enthusiasm burns out.”

“I thought, what a brave idea when so many Japanese and non-Japanese are afraid to go to Fukushima,” said Hiroe Makiyama, a Parliament member in Mr. Kan’s Democratic Party of Japan who is helping promote the project. “No one intends to die there. They don’t really want to do this, but they feel they have to do this.”

Mr. Yamada got so busy working from home that he found some office space in a narrow walk-up in Tokyo’s Shimbashi neighborhood. In a spartan room with a couple of computers, a

hot water pot and a few folding chairs, Mr. Yamada and his team are applying to become a nonprofit group and awaiting approval of their application to visit the Daiichi plant in July.

Mr. Yamada and Mr. Shiotani say the hardest part of their jobs may be dealing with officials at Tokyo Electric Power, or Tepco, as it is known. As engineers, they understand that their counterparts, who undoubtedly are very busy, likely will have bruised egos, given the scale of the damage and the tumbling status of the company.

But unlike high-paid consultants and vendors, the Skilled Veterans Corps has nothing to sell but ideas and hard work. As volunteers, they do not have a conflict of interest and can speak openly, they say. Still, Mr. Yamada and Mr. Shiotani recognize that they must be humble. Yoshimi Hitotsugi, a spokesman for Tepco, said that the company is “highly appreciative” of the offers of help, but that it is still deciding what the volunteers are capable of doing and how to ensure their safety.

Mr. Yamada, an avid bicyclist, said he did not expect to start working at the Daiichi plant until autumn because of the intense heat and humidity during the summer. Even the engineer, he said that no one, not even older workers, should do anything hastily.

“We won’t take any reckless or meaningless action,” he said. “We won’t do fruitless work.”

Yasuko Kamiizumi contributed reporting.