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If I were a nuclear refugee

By Leslie Sullivan Sachs, Brattleboro

After the earthquake, tsunami and the triple nuclear meltdowns in Fukushima, Japan, I imagined myself a mother in Japan, one of 140,000 people shepherding my children into a world of invisible radiation amid destruction. You see, I live five miles from Vermont Yankee. It was easy to imagine. Today, five years later, as I put myself in the shoes of a mother again, the choices I must make are overwhelming.

Like my home town of Brattleboro, Namie is 5 miles northwest of the nuclear site, and was once a town of 15,000 people known for its tourism, fishing and farming. It is a ghost town and a nuclear waste dump. As an evacuee, I have a housing allowance; perhaps we moved to another small town, where “survivor stigma” marks us; some people call us free loaders, or act from fear that we are contagious. Maybe we gave up our rural roots to move to Tokyo, one of the biggest cities on earth. Along with my family, 80,000 other people from 11 towns are still nuclear refugees.

Perhaps our family fled Iitate. This town of 6,000 is outside the evacuation zone, like Putney, and about as far from the Daiichi reactors as Putney is from Vermont Yankee. The government wants us to return in 2017, but only 50 of its 200 square miles have been decontaminated, mostly fields and strips along roads. Forests and hillsides remain untouched, and so heavy rains wash radiated soils back onto decontaminated areas. Last fall 400 bags of radiated waste washed into the local river. I worry about my children’s health. Already, over 100 Fukushima children have thyroid cancer. Yet if we refuse to return, the government will cut our housing subsidy because we will be “voluntary refugees.”

What kind of education and social life would my kids have there? Of the towns that reopened this September, only 2% of evacuees have returned, mostly old folks. Mold has destroyed our home, and it will cost tens of thousands of dollars to clean it up.

The town of Naraha is reopened but has no schools, and half the town is a “temporary” contamination dump. Almost everyone who has returned to Naraha and Hirano are either old, or work at the Daiichi reactors and are housed in new buildings. But how safe is it to work there? The government says no workers are dying, but others say that workers quit when they get sick from radiation, and so are not counted when they die months later. If my husband gets a job cleaning up the Daiichi nuclear reactors, would my children and I stay in our new home, while he comes home only on weekends, like many other couples are doing? That has led to so many divorces.

Everywhere I look there are huge bags of radioactive debris, stacked three and four on top of each other, covering whole fields and parking lots. 9 million bags, at last count. The radioactive debris is the responsibility of the prefecture (state) it is found in. If I lived in the town of Kawauchi, I could return to one part of town, but closed neighborhoods in the evacuation zone are full of these bags.

Can I trust our government to tell us the truth? Two former prime ministers say nuclear power should be eliminated. Our newest Prime Minister, Abe, passed a state secrets law, and now journalists are being jailed for writing critically about nuclear energy. Abe lied to the International Olympics Committee, saying everything would be cleaned by 2020. Money for refugees and for cleaning up is drying up and is instead flowing to Tokyo for the Olympics. 2,300 of the 3,600 public radiation monitors – including those in schools and parks – are being removed to save money. Because Fukushima was

once famous for its agriculture and food, the government is raising the limit of allowed deadly cesium and strontium 90 in food, promoting farming there again, making public schools buy it for school lunches. Is it really safe for my children to eat?

How can I trust my government or TEPCO, the owner of the Daiichi facility, to tell me the truth about radiation? This week – five years after the fact -- TEPCO admitted that it waited two months before telling the public that the nuclear reactors had, indeed, melted down. TEPCO told the government three days after the disaster, so the government covered up, too. It is not our way to defy authority, but this has changed everything.

For five years, I have been faced with tough choices and bureaucracy, but raising children in this new world has been the hardest part. Like the average evacuee, we have moved four times. They are anxious from the trauma of evacuation, the separation from their grandparents, cousins, schools and friends, and mom and dad fighting over what to do, over money. I have had to comfort my children when they were ostracized for being nuclear refugees; other children can be so cruel. There are still many days I can't bear to let them outside, even after 5 years and being told it is safe. I had to explain to them that no one can see radiation, but it could be in the playground's dirt, in the rain, in the snow. Now they fear what they cannot see.

...If I put myself in the shoes of a Fukushima mother, this is what I imagine I feel: I grieve for my lost town and the generations of farmers and fishermen who were my ancestors there. I grieve for my children's loss of childhood. I think of the babies now being born in Chernobyl, deformed by radiation through the mother's DNA, and I worry about my children's children and the fate of Japan.