

FOR JAPAN'S NUCLEAR REFUGEES, INSULTS AND REJECTION PERSIST

'SHE'S A FUKUSHIMA KID. SHE CARRIES CONTAGIOUS RADIATION'

HIRONO: Satsuki Sekine's home was destroyed in Japan's 2011 tsunami disaster and her family fled in the nuclear panic that followed. But crueler still were the insults and stigmatization she faced in the community where she sought refuge. Rather than offer sympathy, Sekine's new classmates bullied her with nasty jibes-part of an epidemic of discrimination in a nation where the vulnerable and the different can be marginalized.

"She's a Fukushima kid. She carries contagious radiation" were among the taunts the evacuee, now 15 years old, endured in her new home far from the ravaged northeast and the crippled Fukushima nuclear plant. "My house was destroyed in the earthquake and swept away in the tsunami," Sekine told AFP. "One of my relatives died in the disaster. We had to flee from the nuclear accident." "After all that, I was bullied at school," the 15-year-old said. "I was so depressed that I wanted to die."

Sekine is now living back near her original home, in a region which is slowly recovering from the disaster that drove more than 160,000 people from their homes when the tsunami-lashed plant went into meltdown. But she is just one of many children and adults who have faced insults, ostracism and even violence in towns and cities where they sought sanctuary.

'Just go away'

Japan is famed for social order and exquisite manners. But behind the facade is a suffocating group identity that can result in bullying of those who stand out, a dynamic blamed for a high rate of child and adult suicides. In the immediate aftermath of the quake-tsunami disaster which left 18,500 people dead or missing, a sense of solidarity swept Japan as it faced its greatest

postwar crisis and municipalities welcomed the displaced.

"Ganbarou Nippon" (Don't give up, Japan) was a common refrain as the nation pulled together. But reaction to the refugees at street level was often cold. Urara Aoyama, now 16, tried hard not to let her new classmates know her family came from a town beside the stricken plant. "But word spread when I entered middle school," said Aoyama, who, with Sekine, now attends high school in the town of Hirono near their original homes, which remain off limits. Aoyama too was questioned about the contagiousness of radiation, taunted and told she should just go away. "They said such things behind my back, sometimes intentionally in loud voices so I could hear," she said.

'Totalitarian environment'

Asao Naito, a bullying expert at Tokyo's Meiji University, said Japan's education system suppresses individuality and makes children prone to pick on the different. "So evacuees from Fukushima are preyed upon in the totalitarian environment of Japanese schools," he said. A recent case in Yokohama, south of Tokyo, stirred outrage after it emerged that a boy had been extorted of 1.5 million yen (\$13,000) by classmates. He was also slapped and pushed around and accused of living on government "compensation". He swallowed the pain for years while secretly siphoning cash from home to pay his tormenters.

Kei Hida, the family's lawyer, said she believed the boy could not bear to open up to his family knowing his mother had also suffered abuse from neighbours. "Garbage was thrown at her and she received an anonymous letter telling the family to leave the neighbourhood," Hida said. Lawyer Tomohiro

Kurosawa said that part of the problem is that for many Japanese the Fukushima evacuees are not seen as "victims" as nobody in authority has yet been held accountable.

Not a single arrest has ever been made, plant operator Tokyo Electric Power Co was rescued with public money, and the government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is committed to restarting nuclear plants. "When victims speak out under these circumstances, they appear to criticise the nation and are penalised socially," Kurosawa said. "Government policies cloud the status of the victims, creating room for others to reject and attack them."

Wartime echoes

Kurosawa, who has represented radiation victims from Hiroshima and Nagasaki, said the stigma imposed on Fukushima has historical echoes of the harsh treatment that survivors of the WWII atomic bombs endured.

Despite their suffering and their status as the first victims of the atomic age, many were shunned-in particular for marriage-due to prejudice over radiation exposure.

On returning to Fukushima, Sekine and Aoyama began attending a school which was set up primarily for students from contaminated areas. There, they perform with other students in a play describing the region's ordeal. "Through contact with each other, their scars are gradually healing and they themselves are recovering," their teacher Shunichi Kobayashi said of the cast members. "Each of them has experienced all sorts of painful events, so that makes them unite with each other." Acting out their trauma is helping overcome the pain, he said. And Sekine says she now no longer wants to die. "I will not run away from hardship," she said. — AFP



KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysians protest outside the North Korean Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. — AP

US MOVE ON N KOREA TESTS RISKS CHINA CLASH

WASHINGTON: The United States is scrambling to develop a new strategy to counter North Korea's aggressive nuclear weapon and missile programs, but tougher sanctions could provoke a diplomatic clash with China. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson will visit Washington's frontline allies South Korea and Japan next week before heading on to great power rival China to discuss the mounting crisis.

Kim Jong-Un's regime is testing a new ballistic missile that could threaten US bases and cities in the Pacific rim, and rocket salvo tactics that could overwhelm missile defense systems. Most observers see China as the only power with the leverage to get its isolated neighbor to stand down, and existing United Nations-backed sanctions have had little effect so far. The crisis is the first major security challenge of Donald Trump's presidency, and the Pentagon has already provoked China's ire by deploying the THAAD anti-missile system in South Korea.

Now, other options are being considered, and the hawkish wing of the Washington foreign policy community is pushing for measures that would hurt Chinese banks that work with Pyongyang. State Department spokesman Mark Toner would not be drawn on the details of any plan Tillerson might take to Asia, but officials confirmed that an urgent policy review is underway.

Toner said the North Korean threat would be "front and center" in the planned talks next week between Tillerson and his Chinese, South Korean and Japanese counterparts. The senior diplomats would, he said, "talk through what our options are and new ways to look at resolving the situation." But the signals coming out of China are not encouraging for those in Washington who cling to the hope that Beijing may be ready to rein in its small but belligerent neighbor.

On Wednesday, Foreign Minister Wang Yi implied that the United States and North Korea were equally at fault for provoking the latest crisis and headed towards a "head-on collision." Wang urged the US military to halt planned exercises with South Korea, in exchange for Pyongyang halting its nuclear and missile programs-an idea Washington promptly dismissed. "The onus is on North Korea to take meaningful actions toward denuclearization and refrain from provocations," Toner said. China has in the past supported measures against North Korea's nuclear program, but six sets of UN sanctions since Pyongyang's first test in 2006 have failed to slow it.

Nuclear strike

North Korea is now building and testing an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) with a solid fuel motor that could be carried by a small, easily-hidden road convoy. This would be harder for existing US and South Korean forces to detect and counter, and could put American mainland cities as well as US bases in Japan in range of a nuclear strike.

But, North Korea watchers in Washington argue, this is not such a worry to China, which opposed the North Korean nuclear program itself but does not see the new missile as such an issue. "The Chinese are not serious about this threat," said former US official Anthony Ruggiero, a veteran of the State Department and US Treasury's sanctions and counter-proliferation teams. For Ruggiero, a fellow at the hawkish Foundation for Defense of Democracies, the key to getting Beijing to take notice is to fine the banks that give North Korea access to international finance. — AFP



HIRONO: This picture taken on February 22, 2017 shows Futaba Future School teacher Shunichi Kobayashi (C) and members of a theatre club at the school posing for a photo. — AFP