

Six Months on: Red Cross Volunteers help Fukushima survivors socialize - Japan Diary 3 by Francis Markus in Yabuki, Fukushima Prefecture -

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It's bucketing down with rain, but as far as I can see that doesn't seem to dampen the fun taking place under the canopies in the car park of the temporary shelter settlement.

From the window of a makeshift kitchen, the women are shovelling noodles into a series of bamboo tubes, along which they float on water, until the diners at the other end gleefully scoop them up into their bowls.

For reasons which I think are obvious, the Japanese call this *nagashi somen*, or river of noodles. For outsiders like me, it's a fun experience to watch and take part in.

(Photo: Fun event called *nagashi soumen*. From the window of a makeshift kitchen, the women are shovelling noodles into a series of bamboo tubes, along which they float on water, until the diners at the other end gleefully scoop them up into their bowls.)



Social Ice Breaker

But it does have a serious purpose. In this town, some 60 km from the Fukushima nuclear plant,

the activity, organised by three groups of local Japanese Red Cross volunteers, is also serving as a social ice-breaker.

“When I first came here, I didn’t know anybody, but now I think everybody is very kind,” says Harue Ishigami, who lives here with her daughter and grandson after their house was destroyed by the March 11th tsunami.

People tell us that most of the dozens of families living in these temporary homes were in the same position when they came – many of them evacuated from the exclusion zone around the Fukushima plant. And so activities like this and various bazaars which the volunteers have organised, are helping to knit this disparate group of people slowly into a community.

(Photo: Fun days like this aren’t officially part of the JRCS psychosocial programme, because they’re not structured or technically monitored. But they certainly serve a similar purpose – helping to improve people’s state of mind. (c) Nobuyuki Kobayashi)



No Straightforward Task

I don’t think it’s a straightforward task. “The residents are a bit shy and they don’t like to rely on assistance,” says volunteer Hiite Kumada. So one of the residents’ leaders prepared the ground by distributing flyers and encouraging people to come.

Some of the people who’ve come here today are from other temporary shelter settlements nearby.

It’s when the noodle river has dried up and given way to the next activity - water melon bashing - that we meet one such family, a young mum and her three little boys.

Lively and perky 6-year-old Yuki excels at this sport, which involves being blindfolded and given a plastic baton to locate and blast away at a good-sized water melon which someone lays down near you on plastic sheeting.

It looks like a good way of getting rid of that surplus energy. Watching Yuki bounding around and grabbing at his mother, I can soon see that he’s got an ample supply of that.

“Before the earthquake, he was the calm one; being the middle child, he was always calming the other two down. But immediately after the disaster he became very aggressive and even violent.”

(Photo: Water melon bashing - which involves being blindfolded and given a plastic baton to locate and blast away at a good-sized water melon which someone lays down near you on plastic sheeting. (c) Nobuyuki Kobayashi)

Trauma not Uncommon

Of course that isn't by any means an uncommon story after events such as this massive disaster. But in Yuki's case, his mum says doctors diagnosed him with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and hospitalised him for a while.

I guess he must be gradually getting better because his mum doesn't seem as worried about him now.

But seeing him reminds me that it isn't only the isolated elderly and middle-aged who can benefit from a bit of fun and activity. And I hope the volunteers will keep up their efforts over the next few months to organise more.