

Project in Japan prior to INC2
Technical Report from August 1 to October 1, 2010
Reported by Takeshi Yasuma (CACP)
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September, 2010 Kumamoto and Minamata Visit

Summary

Mr. Takeshi Yasuma from CACP visited Kumamoto and Minamata Cities from September 12 to 15 to meet Dr. Masazumi Harada, Mr. Yoichi Tani, Ms. Shinobu Sakamoto and other Minamata victims and supporters. He visited some sites related to Minamata disease and also made a presentation at a meeting with Minamata residents primarily to raise their awareness about the proposed mercury treaty. This was an important opportunity to further strengthen the relationship with the Minamata community and build up established communication lines.

Meeting with local media

1. NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation) Kumamoto Station

Mr. Takeshi Yasuma met Mr. Masashi Shinzato, Director of NHK Kumamoto Station and one of his team members on September 12, 2010.

Mr. Shinzato told Mr. Yasuma in advance that he had taken an interest in the CACP's activities for INC2. At the two hour meeting, Mr. Yasuma explained to them the purpose and outlines of the activities, including the visit to Kumamoto/Minamata, the NGO International Symposium to be held in Tokyo on December 4, and the planned NGO events at Makuhari for INC2. Mr. Shinzato shared their plan to follow CACP to film NGO activities. NHK followed Mr. Yasuma's site visit in Minamata and his lecture to Minamata people on September 13.

2. Kumamoto Nichinichi Shimbun

The Kumamoto Nichinichi Shimbun is a local newspaper in Kumamoto Prefecture and has had a good reputation in reporting the Minamata disease case for a long time. The newspaper also has taken an interest in trends of global mercury reduction and sent Mr. Michikazu Iseri, Director of Policy and Economy Division, to INC1 at Stockholm in June this year. Mr. Yasuma met him and explained CACP's activities for INC2. Mr. Iseri showed his interest in INC2 and told of his plan to participate in INC2 as well as the symposium on December 4. The Kumamoto Nichinichi Shimbun reported on September 15 Mr. Yasuma's lecture at the meeting with Minamata people on September 14.

Dr. Harada's testimony in Kumamoto District Court

Dr. Masazumi Harada testified on September 13 at the Kumamoto District Court for the Minamata victims regarding their lawsuit for recognition as Minamata disease victims. He is a world-famous doctor who has been working for Minamata victims for more than 50 years. Mr. Yasuma met him before his testimony and expressed thanks for his acceptance of participation in the symposium as a lecturer on December 4 at Tokyo. His testimony was very moving as summarized below.

1. Although it has been more than 50 years since the discovery of Minamata disease, there are few medical data for victims. The lack of data is not their responsibility, but the government's responsibility for their omission for comprehensive investigation.
2. At that time, victims ate the same food as their family and their community, where patients of Minamata disease were often found. This fact is enough evidence that victims should be recognized as patients of Minamata disease.
3. It is strange to separate victims in the same family or community because some are patients of Minamata disease and others are not.
4. Because of the lack of initial medical data, the overall situation surrounding victims is more important for Minamata disease than current individual symptoms under the criteria set by government in 1977, which requires a combination of several symptoms.



Victims and supporters gathered in front of Kumamoto District Court



Dr. Masazumi Harada and Ms. Shinobu Sakamoto, a victim of Minamata disease

Site Visit at Minamata

Mr. Yasuma visited Minamata on September 14 guided by Mr. Yoichi Tani, one of the leaders of groups for victims and supporters. He is the Secretary General of Minamata Disease Victims Mutual Aid Association (MDVMAA) and also as a Director of Collaboration Center for Minamata Disease Victims (CCMDV). NHK Kumamoto and Kumamoto Prefecture TV followed the site visit to film it.

1. The Hyakken Drainage Outlet

Mr. Tani first took Mr. Yasuma to the Hyakken Drainage Outlet discharged from Chisso factory, which was the originating point of Minamata Disease. The guideboard there say as follows.

The Hyakken drainage outlet was the originating point of Minamata Disease. From 1932 to 1968, methyl mercury was produced as by-product in the process of manufacturing acetaldehyde and acetic acid at the Chisso company's Minamata factory. It was discharged into the sea (also into



Minamata River) along with waste water from the factory, and polluted Minamata Bay. As a result, Minamata Disease occurred all around the Yatsushiro Sea (the Shiranui Sea) area

It is said that between 70 and 150 tons of mercury were discharged into Minamata Bay, resulting in an accumulation of mercury-containing sludge that reached up to 4 meters thick around the Hyakken drainage outlet.

In 1977, Kumamoto Prefecture began pollution prevention work to remove the sludge, and after 14 years and approximately 48.5 billion yen, both the task of dredging accumulated mercury-containing sludge in Minamata Bay, and that of reclaiming the land, were completed in 1990.

At present, treated factory waste water as well as household waste water flow from the Hyakken drainage outlet. Monitoring has been carried out to confirm the safety of fish and shellfish in Minamata Bay.

No matter how great an amount of money or effort is spent, it is impossible to return a once-polluted and all but destroyed environment to its original state. We must recognize this as lesson to the human race.

2. Historical Background of the Reclaimed Land

Mr. Tani then took Mr. Yasuma to the reclaimed land filled with the mercury-contaminated sludge from dredging the Minamata bay. The guideboard there says:

Waste water containing mercury discharged from the Minamata Plant of Chisso corporation contaminated fish and shellfish in Minamata. It caused what is known as Minamata disease (mercury poisoning). Local residents who consumed large amounts of contaminated fish and shellfish suffered from this toxic nervous system disease.

This industrial pollution is comparable to none in the world.

There remained mercury-containing sludge in the bay.

In order to remove the sludge safely and quickly, and to protect the health of the residents, the prefectural government implemented the Pollution Prevention Project from 1977. It was to remove 1,510,000m³ of sludge. The area covered approximately 2,090,000m² in Minamata bay.

In the construction, the sludge in the dredging area was dumped into the reclaimed land area to be filled and sealed by synthetic fiber sheets. High quality soil taken from the mountains was spread over the sheets to level the land. The project was completed in 1990, and 58 hectares of the reclaimed land came into being.

The project took about 14 years with an enormous amount of 48.5 billion yen (USD 359 million).



Where you are standing now is the land solemnity. Considerable damage to the lives and health of the local residents was experienced here. By visiting this place, we hope all will recognizing the importance of the environment protection.

The most important thing we should note is that the mercury-contaminated sludge dumped into the reclaimed land area has not been treated for mercury removal. The guideboard should state that *“Where you are standing now is the land still contaminated with a hundred tons of mercury and there is a possible concern that the contaminated mercury may leak out and again contaminate environment in future.* (Takeshi Yasuma)

3. Hotaru no Ie (Minamata Firefly House)

Mr. Tani took Mr. Yasuma to the area including “Yudo”, “Modo” and “Tsukinoura” which was one of the places with a high incidence of Minamata disease.

Then he took Mr. Yasuma to Minamata Hotaru no Ie (Minamata Firefly House). It was established in September 1996 as a cooperative workplace and base to tackle the Minamata issues and support victims of fetal/infantile Minamata disease. Mr. Tani of course joined the establishment.



Mr. Yasuma was welcomed at the house by several victims including Ms. Shinobu Sakamoto, a victim of fetal Minamata disease. They served warm-hearted lunch and had a nice conversation with the visitors. There is an office in the house for Mr. Tani to work as a leader of groups for victims and supporters.

4. Presentation Mercury Treaty

Mr. Tani organized a meeting with Minamata victims and supporters for Mr. Yasuma’s presentation on NGOs’ efforts for the Mercury Treaty and Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee, especially INC1 at Stockholm and the upcoming INC2 at Makuhari. Approximately 30 victims and supporters, and the media including N H K Kumamoto and Kumamoto Nichinichi Shimbun gathered at the conference room in Minamata gymnasium.



Although the meeting purpose was primarily to raise the awareness of the Minamata community about the mercury treaty, this was indeed an important opportunity to further strengthen the relationship with the Minamata people.

Mr. Yasuma emphasized the necessity of the people’s involvement in the process for mercury treaty in order to make it strong enough. Victims said that “such a mercury treaty is necessary to eliminate toxic mercury and prevent it from poisoning anywhere else and if Japanese government wants to call the treaty ‘Minamata Convention’, it should fulfill its responsibility to

give relief to all victims soonest”.

The Kumamoto/Minamata visit was fruitful as expected.
Minamata, thank you very much for your cooperation and kindness!

Takeshi Yasuma, Citizens Against Chemicals Pollution (CACP), October 6, 2010

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