

‘It was far worse than I could have imagined...’

*When a massive tsunami ripped through Fukushima in 2011, nuclear fears followed for the Japanese region. Brian Jones of CND Cymru, who has just returned from a fact-finding visit there, tells **Kirstie McCrum** that for those who remain, life there will never be the same again*

FROM the moment we open our eyes in the morning, we live in a world which is truly power-hungry.

Alarm clocks to wake us, kettles to stir us, electric toothbrushes to send us on our way to school and offices with computers and air conditioning, before heading home to dine from ovens and curl up in heated rooms.

It's a hunger for energy which has seen us plunder the Earth's resources for generations and we are seeking ever more ways to supply our extreme habit.

But on the other side of the world in the Japanese prefecture of Fukushima, there is a living, developing example of what horror this drive for energy can bring us to.

Brian Jones, vice-chair of CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament) Cymru, has recently returned from a trip to the disaster-torn area and says that even though it's three and a half years on from the tsunami which tore the heart out of the area and destabilised one of its nuclear plants, lives have not reverted to anything approaching normality.

As a result of the trip Jones went on with charity Green Cross – as part of a small delegation from Wales – he will give an illustrated talk on Tuesday at the Swansea Environment Centre, jointly organised by Swansea Greenpeace, Swansea Friends of the Earth and Swansea CND.

A former maths teacher based in Pontadarwe, Jones' role with CND Cymru is a voluntary one, but the Bridgend native found himself rubbing shoulders with officials including members of parliament, councillors and MEPs in the group of 34 people who went to Japan earlier this year on a fact-finding mission.

On March 11, 2011, an earthquake and subsequent giant tsunami devastated the prefecture of Fukushima on the Pacific coast.

The wall of water reached the tops of tower

blocks and rolled as far as six miles inland.

The natural disaster made 470,000 people homeless but many were evacuated safely, and it was only in the aftermath that the real horror unfolded – one of a nuclear nature.

The back-up generators for the cooling systems at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power station were flooded and several reactors went into meltdown.

A Chernobyl-style catastrophe was averted but nearly four years on experts may not be able to get into the reactors for another decade. Decommissioning could take up to 40 years.

Today, 100,000 people remain evacuated from the area and countries across the world have reassessed the dangers of nuclear energy.

Jones says that it would be difficult to visit the area and come away with any other reaction.

"Although the chances are very small of an event like this happening anywhere in the world, the

consequences are just so immense – there's nothing at all that you can do about it. It's cost about £100bn so far."

The trip was organised by Green Cross, a charity set up by Mikhail Gorbachev in 1992, Jones explains, "to provide aid and assistance to people and environments who have suffered industrial or chemical mishaps".

"Dr Carl Clowes of People against Wylfa B (Anglesey anti-nuclear group PAWB) went last year and encouraged other people to go, so I went with him along with Malcolm Carroll of Greenpeace Wales and Selwyn Jones of the Welsh Language Society.

"We had one morning doing a bit of sightseeing in Tokyo and one afternoon looking around Kyoto, but the rest of the time was concentrating on Fukushima."

A lifelong member of either CND or CND Cymru, Jones admits his mind was already made up about nuclear power, but even he couldn't have foreseen the devastation of Fukushima.

"It wasn't about the theoretical side, it was much more about what situation we're in now, what's good and what's bad. There's not much of the good and a lot of the bad. It's much, much, much worse than I thought it could possibly have been."

The group were taken on a tour round sites in Area Two, where the radiation is constantly monitored and people are as yet not allowed to

return to their homes for overnight trips.

Jones says no risks were taken with their personal safety, but there are places in the region which are simply no-go areas for anyone.

"I was a little worried beforehand, but not seriously. They issued good instructions and dosing meters to us all. A couple of people brought their own Geiger counters but they were measuring stuff all the time when needs be.

"They collected all the individual dosing meters in afterwards and they've all been sent somewhere to be analysed. They said that we'd probably all received about 1,000th of what we'd get from a chest X-ray.

"Area Three is a part where no-one is allowed in, and it's expected the residents will not be allowed back for a long time. I think we're talking 100 years, that sort of time. We didn't go into any of those areas but we did go into Area Two, to a town called Tomioka.

"At one point we did skirt the border of Area Three. We got out at four different places on that trip and we were out of the bus for less than an hour and they were measuring the whole time. The last place we stopped at, we'd been off the bus about three or four minutes and they said we were getting back in because the count was much higher than it should be."

With the first stop at Tomioka train station, the group got a good look at the trail of destruction left

by the tsunami.

"Nothing has been cleared up since the incident. The train station is wrecked, the shops are all wrecked, there are cars upside down all over the place.

"You can see the power of the wave, but the whole time the Geiger counters are going in the background, so the real worry is the stuff you can't actually see."

Jones says that there were many wearing face masks in their group and no-one spoke as they cast their gaze around a ruined town with simply one lone policeman.

"He was there to make sure we didn't stray across a boundary and there was no danger of any of us doing that," he laughs grimly.

Being given access to nuclear engineers meant that Jones felt there was transparency insofar as what they were being told, but the real issues, he says, are about what is in essence a major clear-up operation which is just too vast to grasp.

"I think there's a lot which is just beyond their control and, to some extent, beyond the imagination. They decontaminate the parks by taking away the soil and replacing it with soil from somewhere else. It's just endless.

"They put the soil in bags by the side of the road for a lorry to come and pick up. They put them together, cover them with a plastic membrane and weigh it down with concrete – and that's that. 'Decontamination' has happened where they moved it from, but they've just put it in a different place. Perhaps that's the best you can do, but it puts a different spin on decontamination.

"One of the places they're piling the bags is behind the sea wall by Tomioka station – so if there's another tsunami, it'll bring it all inland and they'll have to start it all over again."

As well as the physical impact on the land, there's also been a terrible human cost for those who lived in the area.

"Tomioka lost 18 people in the tsunami and all the residents were evacuated at 7.30am. They were all removed and initially they were in school gyms and leisure centres and then they were moved to prefabs.

"We spoke to one woman who spent a month in one place, then another, then another, and then she was moved into this prefab where she's now been for three years.

"She and her husband were cattle breeders and had prize specimen bulls. They were told to leave on the morning of the tsunami and leave food out for the animals and they'd probably be back soon – and they weren't allowed back for 45 days. When they went back, the animals had all starved to death."

The stresses of this new, unchosen life have brought yet more miseries for many Japanese families.

"They were a bit cagey speaking about suicide and mental illness and so on, but when they said 18 were killed in Tomioka by the tsunami, there have been 300 deaths which are down as 'disaster-related deaths'. Those would be suicides or heart attacks and stress-related and mental illness-related things. And if that's what happened in one town..." Jones tails off because the thought is too horrible to contemplate.

With people in prefabs which are little more than small rooms with partitions and those dispatched to clear the contaminated areas seemingly climbing an insurmountable peak, Jones says there are more troubles being stored up in Fukushima Daiichi



> A policeman guards a forbidden area in Tomioka, Fukushima



> Malcolm Carroll, Selwyn Jones, Brian Jones of CND Cymru and Carl Clowes



> The aftermath of the Fukushima tsunami in Tomioka



> The barrier between Area Two and the unsafe, forbidden Area Three



> Past the barriers, the forbidden Area Three

“*You can see the power of the wave, but the whole time the Geiger counters are going in the background, so the real worry is the stuff you can't actually see*

nuclear power station itself.

"There are four reactors at the main Fukushima site. One of them was closed for maintenance when the tsunami struck but it had 1,500 fuel rods in the cooling pond on the fifth floor.

"There was an explosion on floors three and four and the engineer from the plant told us the most important thing is to get the fuel rods out because, with the building being structurally damaged, another earthquake, let alone anything else, might drain the water, causing the fuel rods to be exposed to the air and all the radiation will escape.

"He explained that, in three and a half years, they've almost finished that one. There are parts of the other three reactors where no-one has been since the tsunami because it's too radioactive, so they literally have no idea what's happening in there. They're carrying out studies now with robots to see if they can send them in to find out more information."

Public health is a major concern following any radiation leak, and Jones says that there's a hint that there are health issues surrounding the contaminated areas.

"We went to see a Green councillor, Ikuko Hebish, speak in Japan and she said that in children, thyroid cancer cases are currently running at between 150 and 300 times the normal rate.

"Officially, the Japanese government say there is no connection because after Chernobyl cases didn't come up until four years after the incident, so they're saying it's not enough time. But because of the breakdown of the Soviet Union, the medical records in Belarus were destroyed, so no-one knows if there was an increase in childhood cancer because we don't have the records for before four years."

Some of the power brokers whom Jones met on the trip are, he feels, returning to their own countries with a changed opinion of nuclear power.

In Japan itself there has been a shift in their thinking since Fukushima.

"The prime minister of Japan at the time of Fukushima (Naoto Kan) was very pro-nuclear and now he's completely anti-nuclear. He's doing a European tour next year and we're really keen for him to extend it. I want him to speak to the Welsh Assembly – I don't know if it will happen, but that's my ideal.

"We're hoping that Green Cross will be able to send some speakers over here, but in an ideal world, I believe we should have MPs and AMs going out there so they can see what the aftermath is."

Nuclear power currently generates around one sixth of the United Kingdom's electricity. Although the events of Fukushima are unlikely to be replicated here, Jones believes that the events which have plagued the Japanese people since it occurred are enough to convince anyone that nuclear power is not worth the associated risks.

"I worry that if Japan, an advanced country, is in this state, you don't want to think how anyone else would cope with it.

"It hammered home the point that human beings and nuclear power can't coexist for a long period of time for me. It all makes me feel like we have to forget about nuclear power."

Without nuclear as an option, however, it's clear there's a power vacuum.

■ **Brian Jones' talk is on on Tuesday, November 18, at 7pm in the Swansea Environment Centre**



> Brian Jones with Green councillor Ikuko Hebish and Selwyn Jones