

# Five years on, Japan tsunami scars visible and invisible

March 8 2016, by Shingo Ito

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A satellite image from Google's "East Japan Earthquake digital archive project" shows the Japanese city of Miyako, in Iwate prefecture, on February 26, 2016, nearly five years after the devastating tsunami

The eye in the sky tells the story: satellite imagery from Japan's tsunami-ravaged Pacific coast shows the catastrophic aftermath of vibrant communities destroyed five years ago—and their struggle to recover even now.

Walls of sea water inundated a wide swathe of the country's northeast on

March 11, 2011 after a magnitude 9.0 earthquake upended the [ocean floor](#).

They also triggered reactor meltdowns at the Fukushima Daiichi power plant, in the worst nuclear disaster since Chernobyl in 1986, spreading radioactive contamination over a wide area.

While cities and towns farther north escaped the worst of the nuclear fallout, their landscapes were among the most devastated, and, as Japan readies to mark the fifth anniversary of the disaster on Friday, many are still barely recovering.

The tsunami destroyed buildings, swept entire homes out to sea and hurled seagoing vessels of iron and steel onto land as if they were toys thrown about by children.

About 16,000 people are known to have died and some 2,600 people are missing, presumed dead.

Satellite pictures of the city of Miyako taken on March 13, 2011 and released by Google as part of a digital archive, reveal wide tracts of land covered in brown muck.

Another taken late last month shows the landscape still stained by the same colour, but other areas where efforts to rebuild have borne fruit.



Satellite images from Google's "East Japan Earthquake digital archive project" show the Japanese city of Miyako in July 2009 (top), March 2011 (C), two days after the tsunami, and on February 2016 (bottom)

Two days after the tsunami the Hachiman River flowed through Minamisanriku, a city smothered in a mess of mossy green and chalky white—colours dumped when the ocean rolled ashore.

An image taken in November last year reveals a cityscape mostly

cleared, though still dusty brown and awaiting redevelopment.

In Kesenuma, the huge red-hulled ship that the ocean dumped ashore—and which for many became a symbol of the power of the tsunami—has gone, revealing again the green hills of the town.

## 'Lost hope'

But the visible remnants of the disaster tell only part of the story of misery wrought by nature's fury.



A vehicle and houses damaged by the 2011 tsunami lie untouched after four years, in the village of Tomioka, in Fukushima prefecture

In the seaside hamlet of Tomioka, six kilometres (four miles) from the

shuttered nuclear plant at Fukushima, unseeable—though measurable—radiation haunts the land.

Tomioka is still dotted with the carcasses of destroyed homes and wrecked vehicles, the clean-up slowed by the tiny, but dangerous atomic particles that infest the earth.

"Many from my town have lost hope of returning," said Yuji Takahashi, 72, who used to live in the community where citizens gathered under cherry blossoms in spring and held a fire festival in summer to pray for a good harvest.

Trucks and construction vehicles roar along a road where a digital panel shows radiation readings, while cranes haul big black plastic bags full of contaminated waste.

The situation is better in Minamisoma, where lower [radiation levels](#) have allowed evacuated residents to return.



The 2011 tsunami triggered reactor meltdowns at the Fukushima Daiichi power plant, in the worst nuclear disaster since Chernobyl in 1986

Five years ago the powerful waves of the tsunami ripped off roofs and tore homes from their foundations, leaving a landscape reminiscent of Japan's bombed out ruins at the end of World War II.

Now parts of the city, 30 kilometres north of the plant, buzz with the sound of bulldozers, while reconstruction and decontamination workers fill its hotels.

Minamisoma plans to build an industrial complex, set up solar panels and allow farmers to grow rice on cleared land where the government says radiation levels are safe, as it tries to lure back residents.

Former evacuee Sayuri Tanaka works at a community café serving young mothers and babies just metres (yards) away from the construction site.

She left the city for three years mainly due to fears over the impact of radiation on her six-year-old daughter, but ultimately decided to return.

She is sanguine about her decision to return home.

"It is more important for me to take a step forward than to keep worrying."

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