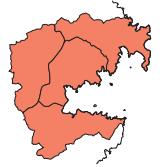


Unable to cremate, unable to mourn



▲ View of the sea from the town's cemetery.
Before the earthquake, the sea was visible beyond the buildings, now the sea appears closer.

One after another, bodies found by search teams were brought into Cultural Exchange Hall in Bayside Arena. The sight of so many corpses laying in the hall was a difficult reality to accept. Immediately after the disaster, Miyagi Prefectural offices received a succession of calls from coastal municipalities stating that there was nowhere to bury the bodies and that there were not enough coffins. 7 of the prefecture's 27 crematoria were damaged and unable to operate. Cremation capacity in Miyagi Prefecture fell to about a quarter of normal in part due to fuel shortages. Only 50 bodies could be cremated each day, which was not enough to keep up with the number of corpses.

Following the 13 March newspaper report that "10,000 people in Minamisanriku Unable to be Contacted," the mayor of the town was informed by the Governor of Miyagi Prefecture that "we will send 1,000 coffins first." While the number of victims was still unknown, the mayor imagined the extent of the damage from the number of coffins, "wondering how many people will be affected in the town." While there was a shortage of coffins in many areas affected by the disaster, coffin materials piled high in trucks arrived in town. The affected residents unloaded them and assembled them one by one.

The town crematorium could not operate due to power failure. Bereaved families were at a loss as they were unable to cremate the bodies handed over to them. Crematoriums in neighboring municipalities were overwhelmed and it would take too long, many families had to go to Yamagata Prefecture or other distant places outside the prefecture for cremation. While some affected municipalities were forced to perform temporary burials of the dead, Minamisanriku was narrowly able to avoid this practice.

However, no funeral service could be organized, and the only option was to send the coffin off to be cremated with a small gathering of relatives, in a lonely manner. Some people are still waiting for the return of missing family members. One family held a funeral for a family member they had not seen since that day and inscribed their name on the grave. The grief of bereaved families who have nothing to bury in newly carved graves can only be imagined.