

Hatoyama apologizes to Minamata disease victims  
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KUMAMOTO - Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama attended on Saturday an annual memorial service for the victims of Minamata mercury-poisoning disease in Minamata, Kumamoto Prefecture, and apologized for the government not being able to prevent the spread of the disease in Japan's worst industrial pollution case.

"As a representative of the government, I admit responsibility...for not being able to prevent the disease from spreading and offer my most sincere apology," Hatoyama, who became the first premier to take part in the event since the memorial service was launched in 1992, said in a speech.

About 800 people attended the event, which commemorates official recognition of the disease on May 1, 1956. They included disease sufferers, as well as Environment Minister Sakihito Ozawa and Shunkichi Goto, chairman of chemical maker Chisso Corp, which dumped mercury-tainted water into the sea, causing the disease.

Last month, the government adopted redress measures for unrecognized Minamata disease sufferers, featuring 2.1 million yen in lump-sum payments and 12,900 to 17,700 yen in monthly medical allowances per person.

The government started accepting applications Saturday. It will be the largest settlement since a rescue package was compiled in 1995 by the government for unrecognized sufferers of Minamata disease.

"I don't think at all that (the adoption of redress measures) marks an end to the issue," Hatoyama said.

He said Japan will keep making efforts in promoting medical care and welfare for those suffering from the fetal Minamata disease, as well as warming of ties in local communities and tell the world what it has learned from the incident.

He also expressed hope Japan will actively contribute to creating an international treaty for preventing such mercury poisoning and naming the treaty the "Minamata treaty."

Ahead of the memorial service, the environment minister held a meeting to exchange opinions with several groups of victims, including those who accepted the redress measures.

During the meeting, Yoshiharu Murakami, president of a victims' group, urged the government to help all of the victims including those who did not take part in the court battle.

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