Beat: Technology

Google adds Japan nuclear ghost towns to Street View feature

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USPA News - Additional Japanese towns left deserted and off-limits after the earthquake and nuclear power plant crisis in March 2011 are now visible to the outside world after internet search giant Google added imagery Wednesday to its popular Street View feature on Google Maps. Google Street View, which provides panoramic views at street level, is available in 48 countries around the world.

Japan has long been part of Street View, but cars from the company were recently allowed to return to the region and inside the 19-kilometer (11.8 mile) nuclear exclusion zone to create a permanent record of the tragedy. "We are publishing imagery today of new areas within the Fukushima Exclusion Zone, including the abandoned towns ?kuma and Futaba," Street View`s Group Product Manager Kei Kawai said. "This includes roads near the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Plant, and in the new imagery, you can see the entrance to the plant on Street View." Kawai said its project also aims to illustrate the process Japan has made in the more than two years since the disaster. "Towards that goal, we`ve driven our Street View cars throughout the Tohoku region again over the past months. Today we are updating the Street View imagery for 17 cities within the Iwate and Miyagi Prefectures for the first time since we published the first panoramas back in 2011," he said. The disaster began in March 2011 when an enormous 9.0-magnitude earthquake struck off the coast of northeastern Japan, generating a devastating tsunami that wiped out entire communities and killed at least 15,883 people. A building housing the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant exploded and three of its nuclear reactors suffered a meltdown, triggering the world`s worst nuclear accident since the 1986 Chernobyl disaster. But more than two years after the accident, as the world has moved on and parts of the affected region have begun recovering, the exclusion zone remains in place and tens of thousands of people have been unable to return home. Authorities declared a serious incident last month after highly contaminated water was found leaking from a tank, causing increased levels of radiation at the site. In March of this year, Google introduced imagery from the Japanese city of Namie-machi, showing deserted streets, collapsed buildings, and fishing boats which were washed inland by the tsunami. Fearing danger from radiation, the 21,000 residents of Namie-machi are still not allowed to enter what was once their city. "Many of the displaced townspeople have asked to see the current state of their city, and there are surely many people around the world who want a better sense of how the nuclear incident affected surrounding communities," Namie-machi Mayor Tamotsu Baba said in March, adding that the lingering nuclear hazard has allowed them to do only cursory work over the past two years. Tamotsu Baba asked people around the world to view the imagery to understand the "tremendous gravity" of the situation and hoped it will become a permanent record of what happened to the city. "It may take many years and many people`s help, but we will never give up taking back our hometown," he said at the time. The mayor said he believes it has become his generation`s duty to make sure future generations understand the history and culture of the city. "Those of us in the older generation feel that we received this town from our forebearers, and we feel great pain that we cannot pass it down to our children," he said.

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