Beat: Technology

Google adds Japan nuclear ghost town to Street View feature

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USPA News - A Japanese city left deserted and off-limits after the earthquake and nuclear power plant crisis in March 2011 is 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 allowed to return to the Japanese city of Namie-machi this month to create a permanent record of the tragedy. 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. 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. More than two years after the accident, as the world has moved on and parts of the affected region have begun recovering, a 19-kilometer (11.8 mile) exclusion zone still surrounds the disaster site at the nuclear power plant. 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," said Mayor Tamotsu Baba. "Working with Google, we were able to drive Street View cars through Namie-machi to capture panoramic images of the abandoned city exactly as it stands today." The imagery shows deserted streets, collapsed buildings, and fishing boats which were washed inland by the tsunami. "In Namie-machi, time stands still," the city`s mayor said. "With the lingering nuclear hazard, we have only been able to do cursory work for two whole years." Tamotsu Baba asked people to view the imagery to understand the "tremendous gravity" of the situation and he hopes 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. 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. The earthquake and resulting tsunami left at least 15,882 people killed while 2,668 people remain missing and feared dead.

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483 Green Lanes
UK, London N13NV 4BS
contact (at) unitedpressagency.com
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