

Fearing new tsunami, Japanese town to vote on relocation

RICK WALLACE

TOKYO CORRESPONDENT

YACHTS sway gently on the harbour and gulls wheel across a sky filled with puffy cumulus clouds that don't quite block the fine view of Mt Fuji.

This waterfront district of Numazu City, about 100km southwest of Tokyo, is a tranquil little backwater.

But first impressions can be deceptive; this little suburb is also one of the most dangerous places in the country when it comes to tsunami risk.

Uchiura Omosu, as it is known, is soon to become Japan's — and possibly the world's — first example of a pre-emptive relocation due to tsunami risk.

Residents approached their municipality about moving from the waterfront to a nearby hill amid predictions of widespread carnage in the event of the so-called Nankai quake occurring.

Recent government estimates predict a magnitude 9 earthquake in the Nankai Trough — a zone where several tectonic plates meet off the southern Pacific coast of Honshu — could kill or injure almost one million people.

Previous Nankai quakes have unleashed devastating tsunamis and the latest government assessment puts the expected height of wave at 34m and estimates that 323,000 people could be killed in such a tragedy.

Due to the nearby location of the faults, residents in this part of



Shizuoka Prefecture could get as little as 10 minutes to evacuate before the tsunami tears into their town.

The risk and frequency of Nankai quakes is low, but after the damage and death unleashed by the Tohoku earthquake on March 11 last year, most of Uchiura Omosu's 400 residents are interested in relocation.

To mitigate damage from future tsunamis, the Japanese government has offered to pay for relocation of communities most at risk and will foot the bill for land and some infrastructure, but not the construction of individuals' houses.

The catch is that the entire community has to agree.

In Uchiura Omosu, the local government is fully supporting the move and 80 per cent of the residents support starting discussions on relocation.

Relocation expert Suguru Mori, a professor from Hokkaido University called in to conduct consultations, told the residents, all of whom have houses that sit about 2m above sea level, that it would take a tsunami of only 4m

to wash wood-framed houses away and that the expected height in this area was at least double that.

Most of the residents gathered at the town's hall for a meeting last week seemed committed to the move and eagerly threw up suggestions for placing schools, public transport and supermarkets in the new village, although Professor Mori urged them to think about the likely size of the population and the tax base in both 10 and 30 years.

This town, like much of Japan, is going through population decline.

Professor Mori, who has studied a post-tsunami relocation in the 1990s in Hokkaido and is also working with relocating communities from the March 11 disaster, said the problem in the past had been a failure to properly plan the new community.

"It's important to consider how to make a sustainable community under these circumstances," he said.

"It's not just about the removal of individual, but the collective task of the community to decide how to construct a town for the future."

The professor, who said his role was not to advocate relocation, said there were mixed opinions in Uchiura Omosu.

"The younger generation is inclined to move, considering their children as well as their own lives," he said.

"On the other hand, the elder generation tend to want to stay, perhaps for financial reasons."