

For Smiles in Samawah: Humanitarian Assistance Based on Dialogue and Understanding

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Japanese humanitarian assistance to Iraq, centered in Samawah, was a joint effort between Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ground Self-Defense Force personnel between February 2004 and July 2006. Resolved to make Iraqis themselves the center of the construction effort, Japanese administrators committed themselves to dialogue and understanding with those affected by the projects.

Roughly 280 kilometers to the southwest of Baghdad along the east-west flow of the Euphrates River is the city of Samawah, a lonely, drab, dusty desert outpost of 300,000 people that is unremarkable save perhaps for its giant water tanks and bustling *souk* (market). The majority of the residents there are Shiites, which explains why the city seems to have been largely forsaken under Saddam Regime. When I first arrived there as part of a foreign ministry team to manage Japan's reconstruction assistance in the region, the people lived among the stench of sewers and garbage and had only the scum-covered green Euphrates for a water supply. Power was available for only three hours a day, and hospitals, schools, and other public services were housed in crumbling ruins with hardly any equipment. Even amid the squalor, however, we were invariably greeted in the streets by smiling children, waving and chanting, “*Yaabaanii* [Japanese]!” their voices bouncing off the bullet proof glass of my car. Gazing at them through the dust churned up by the tires, I wondered how best we could respond to those smiles.

Uncharted Territory

The Samawah liaison office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, tucked into a corner of the Japanese Ground Self-Defense Force headquarters there, was nicknamed “Dejima”—a

reference to the enclave set aside for foreigners at the port of Nagasaki during the Edo period (1603-1867). Ten ministry staff was divided into two groups of five that took turns overseeing reconstruction assistance in Samawah in month-long stints. I served eight one-month stays between May 2004 and August 2005, helping to administer overseas development assistance (ODA) projects related to water and power provision, road and bridge maintenance, and other forms of economic cooperation. Everything about working in Samawah was new and unfamiliar, and we often had to grapple with the difficulties and challenges of humanitarian assistance in this particular landscape by trial and error.

Harsh Natural Conditions

Samawah's climate is harsh year-round, with temperatures rising to over 50 degrees Celsius in summer (easily 60 degrees out in the sun) and plunging below zero in winter. On winter nights the shipping container that was our sleeping quarters (we lived in containers through the winter of 2004) became so cold that I could hardly sleep, while in the morning I could not wash my face because the water in the tanks had all frozen. In the spring there were sandstorms, the grit turning my hair and eyebrows white in a matter of seconds and invading every corner of our offices, leaving the rooms gritty and the computers out of order. The rainy season brought the other extreme, torrential downpours that left muck in the city for months on end. Most troubling of all were the sand flies, whose stings leave swelling and a powerful itch. Indeed, some of the bites still itched more than a year later.

Unpredictable Dangers

One eventually grows used to the climate in Samawah, but one thing we could never grow used to was security. I never ventured outside Self-Defense Force grounds without a heavy helmet and bulletproof vest, and when I was not with troop members I had burly security guards surrounding me on all four sides. In some places I was not even allowed alone enough to go to the bathroom. The camp was protected by Self-Defense Force personnel, but that did not preclude the possibility of missile attacks at night. I myself experienced five attacks, three by trench mortar, and two by rockets. The boom and blast of mortars making impact and the

sounds of rockets screeching overhead were more than enough to remind us of the situation that we were in.

Working with the Ground Self-Defense Force

Such were the conditions that we liaison office staff faced as we worked with the reconstruction support groups of the Ground Self-Defense Force to provide assistance in Samawah. When I arrived in Samawah, the liaison office and the Ground Self-Defense Force, often characterized as the “twin wheels” of Japan’s aid to Samawah, were just getting set to roll. Although the effort in Samawah represented the first attempt by the foreign ministry and the Ground Self-Defense Force to make their very different organizations work together in pursuit of their projects—an “unthinkable” venture, according to one coalition forces official—I believe the quality of our relationship was best captured by the word that troop members often used to describe us ministry staff: comrades.

The Iraqi Community

Iraqi society rests on a delicate balance between competing political, bureaucratic, tribal, and religious hierarchies. One needs to be careful in dealing with this balance, since tipping it in any way could lead to conflict. Such considerations make it extremely difficult to determine whose voice to give priority. Iraqis tend also to want to look people over before they trust them and do not easily accept outsiders, so that it takes time before they open up enough for real dialogue. In the end, the only solution is to go out, listen to many people and see many things, and decide for oneself. An Iraqi can easily talk without stopping for two or three hours, but hearing them out, too, is part of the process. I made a great many friends through such conversations, although occasionally I felt sorry that I could not go out to enjoy a drink with these Muslims in the same way that I would with acquaintances in Japan. Finally, I should note that although there is little mass media in Samawah, word had a way of getting around incredibly quickly. News spreads rapidly from mouth to mouth, and we needed to be careful, since rumors could have unexpectedly potent consequences.

If Only We Had a Magic Lamp

“We want you to make Samawah like Tokyo.” Nearly every Japanese involved in reconstruction assistance heard and was taken aback by this statement at least once. Now, of course, I know to just brush it off with a cheerful “*Insha ’Allah* [If Allah so wills],” although I found myself at a loss as to how to respond at first. After all, it is not as if we had access to Aladdin’s magic lamp, notwithstanding the perfect seriousness of the Iraqis in making this request. So our first task was to get residents to understand what we could and could not do, as well as to stress that it was they, not we, who should stand at the center of the reconstruction process.

My duties in Samawah included attending regular weekly meetings with Iraqi administrative departments, the local council, NGOs, international coalition forces, and other relevant bodies to coordinate assistance on such matters as water, power, roads, and public health. At these meetings, we discussed the overall needs of each locale as a first step toward planning new projects while reviewing and trying to improve projects already implemented. Sometimes, however, problems asserted by the Iraqi side led to raised voices and tension; it took patience and fortitude to get through some of these long sessions.

In addition to these weekly sessions, I frequently met separately with representatives from Iraqi administrative departments, coalition forces, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), NGOs, and other organization staff. While Japan’s ODA projects were mainly developed in consultation with the different Iraqi administrative departments (e.g., bureaus of water, power, or road maintenance), conferring with other assistance organizations in the region proved essential in understanding how our efforts fit into the big picture. The activities of the UNDP and NGOs, in particular, greatly helped supplement our own projects.

While these official discussions were certainly necessary in planning projects, the focus of assistance efforts lies above all with the actual people and places involved. A project plan does residents no good until it is executed and the materials and equipment brought in start serving their intended purpose. In the special situation that prevailed in Iraq, I felt that it was important for me to visit project sites as much as possible in order to talk to the people there and oversee details. However painstakingly one may listen to all sides in planning a project,

there is no guarantee it will not run into trouble with local residents once it begins. Such problems, if left unsolved, could very easily become a source of conflicts among residents and cause people to turn against us. Whenever problems did occur, I asked the local council to gather everyone involved so I could talk things out with them. This occasionally meant enduring frightful looks from local tribal members, but with repeated discussion and plenty of time, things usually got straightened out in the end. We were there strictly to help, and for us to push assistance projects on residents who were either unable or unwilling to agree to them would have been misguided and downright dangerous. For our work to be accepted within the community, we needed first to nurture trust with residents based on steady dialogue and effort. Such a process costs much in terms of time and energy, of course, but it is, I believe, what is required for assistance to be truly successful.

“Captain Tsubasa” Water Trucks

Of all the project areas we were involved in, including for example repair of public buildings, the one of crucial importance to the region of Muthanna (where Samawah is located), and that we consequently worked on the hardest, was water. Central to this undertaking was a gigantic project to use trucks to supply water to local tanks throughout Muthanna from four purifying stations together capable of producing 220 tons of clean water per hour.

In embarking on this project, I looked around for something special we could do that would please the children of Samawah and help us connect with local residents. Eventually I thought of having the water trucks that were to make weekly rounds of the local tanks function as “goodwill ambassadors.” As to whose power to enlist for this weighty task, the answer could be none other than Captain Majed, the popular hero of the Arabic version of the Japanese soccer animation series *Captain Tsubasa*. My idea was to paint giant images of Majed on the sides of the water trucks and have him travel all over Muthanna. What would be better for the children than to have their favorite cartoon character “Majed” bring them water? We put this plan into action right away (for further details, see the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website).

To this day, Captain Tsubasa/Majed is hard at work bringing precious supplies of water

to Samawah and the outlying desert. I myself had several opportunities to see groups of children eagerly chasing after Tsubasa, their faces lit up with smiles. The sight greatly encouraged me and made me proud to be Japanese. One local council member told me that in his area, where the water truck was scheduled to come every Wednesday, children looked out eagerly for Majed from as early as Tuesday.

Assistance Based on Dialogue and Understanding

Japan's humanitarian assistance activities in Samawah came safely to a close after two and a half years in July 2006. Every day of those years was a series of unending challenges. We owed our success to the willingness of the Ministry and Ground Self-Defense Force to put aside differences and work together in pursuit of common goals. It also helped that we were able to win acceptance from the people of Samawah, I believe thanks to our commitment to never take the easy way out but to listen carefully to local residents no matter how much time it took and to always pursue our work sincerely in a spirit of dialogue and understanding based on the conviction that the Iraqis themselves should be at the center of the reconstruction effort.

In Japan I often came across media coverage claiming that Japanese aid in Iraq was not appreciated, but that perception does not fit at all with my own experiences there. We were able to achieve impressive results in many project areas, and local residents were very evident in their feelings of *shukran* ("thank you").

On my last day in Samawah in August 2005, gazing at the children brightly smiling and waving at me as usual, I felt a sense of fulfillment and relief tinged with sadness. I pray those smiles will never go away.

[author bio]

Second Secretary, Embassy of Japan in the United States. Yasuyuki Ebata entered the Ministry of Foreign Affairs before completing studies at Kanazawa University. He served in positions in the Japanese Embassy in Bulgaria, the Policy Planning Division of the Cultural Affairs Department, the Central and Eastern Europe Division of the European Affairs Bureau,

the Second Middle East Division of the Middle Eastern and African Affairs Bureau, and the Samawah liaison office prior to assuming his present post in September 2005. Recipient of the Kawaguchi Award in recognition of his diplomatic services in July 2004, Ebata was also awarded a certificate of commendation from the foreign minister in June 2006.