

Unfinished Business in a Forsaken Country: Looking Back and Forward

Ogata Sadako

Reflecting on the results of the International Conference on Reconstruction Assistance to Afghanistan held in Tokyo, January 2002, a champion of more effective solutions to refugee problems considers what could have been done better and what Japan can do most effectively to help. The author was interviewed by Sasae Ken'ichiro, then deputy director-general, Foreign Policy Bureau, and currently director-general, Economic Affairs Bureau, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan.

Sasae: You played an important role as co-chair of the recent International Conference on Reconstruction Assistance to Afghanistan held in Tokyo, 21-22 January 2002. When you accepted the post of Special Representative of the Prime Minister of Japan, what were your particular concerns about Afghanistan?

Ogata: You might say it was an item of unfinished business for me. In 1991, when I became the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), refugees from Afghanistan were estimated to be 6.2 to 6.3 million, the largest of all refugee groups in the world.

In 1992 and 1993, after the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, Afghans who had fled to Pakistan and Iran could return to their homeland. Assistance was provided by the Office of the UNHCR and other sources, and I believe some two million returned. But in 1994, civil war broke out in Afghanistan. With the fall of Kabul in 1996, people from the urban educated sector of Afghan society started to flee the country, and most of them went to Pakistan. During this period, when some were repatriating to Afghanistan while others were getting out, there were close to three million Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan.

These were the circumstances under which the U.N. began political negotiations with the Taliban government. By Western standards, however, the Taliban regime represented a radical fundamentalism that, among other things, violated the human rights of women, and its standing in U.N. eyes was far from favorable. The U.N. was reluctant to repatriate refugees and provide funds to help them attain self-sufficiency in an Afghanistan under Taliban rule. This made my job as UNHCR extremely difficult. We had large numbers of Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan, but international interest waned as the refugee problem dragged on, even as Iran and Pakistan applied pressure for more aid. Despite efforts to somehow resolve the problem, the refugees themselves could not return to an Afghanistan ruled by a regime that was trampling the human rights of their countrymen.

I knew something had to be done to draw the world's attention, and in September 2000 I visited Afghanistan with crews from Western media organizations, including CNN and the BBC. Unfortunately, this project did not arouse as much international concern as I had hoped.

Meanwhile, a prolonged drought in Pakistan had left many refugee camps there critically

short of water. Anxious and angry Afghans demonstrated outside the local offices of the UNHCR, demanding to be repatriated.

When we went to Iran the authorities there told us that they simply could not handle such a huge influx of people. The only avenue we could see that was left open to us was to find safe pockets of territory within Afghanistan, repatriate the refugees to those areas, and provide assistance toward stabilizing their daily lives. In that way we did enable the refugees to return to Afghanistan, but we could not get enough support from the international community. Everyone abandoned us. The only country that responded to our call for help was Japan.

Sasae: I believe that was through the Azra Initiative project of reconstruction assistance for local communities in specially designated areas.

Ogata: Yes, this project assisted refugees returning to areas between Kabul and the Pakistan border. It helped launch self-help efforts by developing fields for cultivation, setting up water supplies, and installing home-use electric power generators. We thought that such concrete results of reconstruction assistance would gradually encourage more refugees to return to Afghanistan. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and a number of other aid organizations gave support to this effort, but the U.N. as a whole was unresponsive.

Sasae: Why was that?

Ogata: Political negotiations were still under way, and influential member countries, including Russia and the United States, were opposed to providing assistance. Another reason was that certain U.N. organizations, in particular those engaged in development assistance, viewed development on a country-specific basis. The idea of assisting people who had crossed borders to flee their country or who had come back to their homeland was exceptional, definitely outside mainstream thinking on how to settle the problem. The Office of the UNHCR had no choice but to assume a central role. At the time, as they struggled to deal with the situation, my colleagues repeatedly lamented how the

international community had "forsaken" the Afghan refugees. That was the wretched state of affairs when my term as UNHCR ended and I returned to Japan, the issue of around 2.5 to 3 million Afghan refugees still unresolved.

Sasae: Ironically, the 11 September terrorist attacks put Afghanistan right in the center of the world's political spotlight. All that attention eventually set the Afghanistan reconstruction assistance process in motion and led to your appointment as Special Representative of the Prime Minister and later co-chair of the reconstruction assistance conference.

Ogata: Early in November last year, I received a request from Prime Minister Koizumi to help in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Japan was eager to do everything possible to assist Afghanistan, and so I, too, resolved to do whatever I could. Soon after I accepted the post, a preliminary meeting of senior officials was planned to get the ball rolling. Although that meeting was eventually convened in Washington on 20 November, a number of issues had to be dealt with first, such as where to hold the meeting and who should play the leading role, the United States, Russia, the European Union, or the U.N. The meeting was then convened under the provisional leadership of Japan and the United States. With reconstruction as the main item on the agenda, the meeting sent out a clear message that this would be political assistance and that the international community would continue to be engaged in Afghanistan problems.

Sasae: So you visited the White House and the U.S. State Department at that time?

Ogata: Yes. The United States may have been concerned about the people of Afghanistan, but it was in the middle of military action there, so there was no certainty about how long it would continue to support the reconstruction effort. The Bush administration had come to office on a platform that included minimizing U.S. involvement in international affairs and reducing the government's role as much as possible, so its behavior since September 11 represented a

complete policy about-face. At that juncture, I felt that Japan as a U.S. ally had a role to play in sustaining the United States' involvement by making its own firm contribution to the reconstruction effort. I spent two days meeting with U.S. government officials, assuring them that Japan would do what it could and asking that the United States do the same.

On the Ground

Sasae: The conference was scheduled to be held in Tokyo late in January 2002, and then you visited Afghanistan and neighboring countries. I take it this is the kind of action you mean when you talk about the importance of being "on the ground" at the actual sites in question.

Ogata: I visited Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, and in Afghanistan I traveled to regional cities in addition to Kabul. That was just after the Afghan Interim Administration (AIA) was set up, and insofar as we were the first full-scale foreign delegation that they received, the visit was widely appreciated. AIA Chairman Mr. Hamid Karzai and several of his ministers each spoke with me for more than an hour explaining what they wanted to achieve and what Afghanistan needed.

Sasae: I understand that those talks led to agreement at the Tokyo Conference on the six key priority areas of the reconstruction effort, namely, enhancement of administrative capacity (with emphasis on payment of salaries and establishing the government administration); education (especially for girls); health and sanitation; infrastructure (particularly roads, electricity, and telecommunications); reconstruction of the economic system (particularly the national currency); and agriculture and rural development (including food security, water management, and revitalizing irrigation systems). What were your main impressions when you visited the affected regions?

Ogata: When I went to Herat in September 2000, through the offices of an official of the city's department of education I met the local Taliban governor. I told him that many refugees

wanted to return to Afghanistan but didn't want to come home to a country where girls and women couldn't receive proper schooling or enter the work force, and I asked him what his response was. He told me that he wanted the refugees to come home; it was detrimental to the country that its people did not return. I asked him what he proposed to do about such issues as education for women and girls. He said that the people were poor and that in rural areas there hadn't been a proper education system for girls in the first place, but he added that some efforts were being made to increase educational opportunities for women and girls. I asked to be shown those efforts and my request was granted. I learned later that, because education for girls was officially prohibited, many teachers held tutoring-style classes in private homes out of public view, and it was examples of these underground schools that the governor arranged for me to see. I was shown two such private tutoring-style schools as well as a nursing school attached to the Herat hospital that was attended by girls of about high school age. So educational opportunities for girls were not totally nonexistent under Taliban rule. The international community, however, regarded the Taliban government as totally unacceptable and thought only about how to punish it. I recall suggesting around that time that we should, rather, have offered the Taliban government advice and encouragement in its administrative efforts.

When I went back to Herat this last time, a junior high school for girls had reopened. The school buildings had been restored by a European organization called the Order of Malta and with additional money from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) the school was able to offer girls the chance to attend classes on a trial basis. When I visited the school it was in its third day of operation. The students were of various ages and circumstances, and although they had no textbooks or notepads, they seemed delighted to be there. When I asked the teachers what they needed most, they all said, "wages." They were teaching without pay. But in stark contrast to the recent past, now they were able to teach openly. One long-serving UNHCR official who had come with me expressed deep

joy at the reopening of this school. International organizations and international aid had come together and catalyzed this small but meaningful result. I think this approach of building from the bottom up is extremely important and can be successfully applied in many forms in Afghanistan.

The Herat education department official who escorted me to the school on this occasion happened to be the same one who had taken me to see the governor in September 2000. This surprised me. I was not only surprised to meet the same person again but also struck to see some degree of continuity in government personnel between the Taliban administration and the new one.

Sasae: We mentioned the Azra Initiative a moment ago, a project funded by the Japanese government to facilitate the return of Afghan refugees to their home areas and help them reestablish their livelihoods. Yet Japan has provided assistance to Afghanistan since long ago. It has been involved in establishing communications facilities there, for example.

Ogata: I knew that Japan had provided assistance toward a broadcasting station in Kabul, and so during my last visit I went to see it. Everything, from the building itself to the broadcasting studio facilities and equipment, was from Japan.

Sasae: That was part of the technical assistance provided by Japan in 1977.

Ogata: 1977—it sounds like so long ago. You would think the equipment would be ancient and inoperable, but in fact almost all of it is still well maintained and in good working order. The person in charge explained to me how the facilities had been used over the years. He had been there since before the assistance was provided in 1977. He told us that, because television broadcasting was prohibited during the Taliban rule, he and his colleagues surreptitiously kept the machines rust-free and in working order. They did this by occasionally switching them on for a while with the room lights out so that they wouldn't be discovered. I and everyone



Japan can make a vital contribution in helping to give direction to the region as whole

Ogata Sadako

Former U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees

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present were deeply moved by this account. I wanted to help them repair their broken equipment and put in a new studio, and I sincerely hoped these tasks would be included in Japan's aid program. The television signal from this station is broadcast only within the city of Kabul. For radio, Afghanistan relies mostly on BBC or VOA broadcasts. In strengthening the central government and promoting education, it is essential to have the means of disseminating appropriate messages. In this respect radio and television are crucial.

Four and a Half Billion Dollars in Aid

Sasae: The Tokyo conference, which convened very soon after your return to Japan, attracted great interest. Sixty-one governments, including the AIA, twenty-one international organizations besides the European Union (EU), and a number of NGOs took part. What were the most important goals of the conference?

Ogata: Since the AIA was not only invited but was made the focus of the conference, the goals were to make its needs known to the world, to agree on a plan for responding to those needs, and to provide necessary aid.

Sasae: The total amount of aid eventually pledged was quite a large sum of money.

Ogata: Yes, I agree.

Sasae: What aspects of the conference made the greatest impression on you?

Ogata: Because the AIA was a new government barely a month old, I was concerned about whether or not they would be able to put forward clear-cut views and requests. Fortunately they turned out to be very skilled communicators.

The greatest difficulty was in determining the amount of aid. Without concrete figures there is little to discuss, but at that stage the calculations that would form the basis for pledges were not yet finalized. In any case there was no time, and so instead of setting up a program of requests for concrete amounts, the people from the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and the UNDP decided to set out just a general framework. Money could be paid over one-year, two-and-a-half-year, five-year, or ten-year time frames. While the pledges varied widely from country to country, I think the total of 1.8 billion dollars in the first year and 4.5 billion over a five-year period is quite good.

Sasae: Why do you think this aspect went so well?

Ogata: I think the conference had a mutually stimulating effect on the participating countries. From Japan's point of view, for example, it was assumed that contributions from Europe and the United States would be considerable, so as the host country Japan also felt it should come up with a sizable amount.

It was interesting that Pakistan and Iran pledged 100 million dollars and 560 million dollars, respectively, over five years. I didn't expect any of Afghanistan's neighbors to contribute so much. That they did suggests that those countries believe that achieving stability in Afghanistan under the new administration will be in their own interests as well. No one wants Afghanistan to return to the way it was, and other countries in the region recognize that if

Afghanistan prospers, so will they. Iran, for example, says that it aims to provide considerable materials and labor to rebuild Afghanistan's roads and it also wants to invest in Afghanistan.

Sasae: At the joint press conference after the Tokyo conference, Chris Patten, the European Union's commissioner on external affairs, stressed the importance of speed, ownership, and mid- and long-term commitment in the reconstruction effort.

Ogata: Would-be donors often pledge money but then fail to pay up, so it's essential that the blueprints drawn up by development assistance organizations be formulated into concrete projects as quickly as possible. Once these projects are set up, it is essential to channel the pledged funds into them right away. Speed is essential in both formulating the projects and supplying the funds.

Seamless Transition from Aid to Reconstruction

Sasae: As UNHCR you frequently pointed out that, in the transition from humanitarian aid to reconstruction, actual reconstruction activity often takes a long time to get off the ground, which makes it difficult for refugees to return and settle in. How do you see the outlook for follow-up activities, such as coordination and monitoring, within Afghanistan itself?

Ogata: Once peace returns, humanitarian organizations should shift their central efforts away from simply extending aid and focus on enabling the people to achieve self-sufficiency. Development assistance organizations need to recognize how slow they are in getting their efforts started and devise ways for the work to proceed more quickly.

The organizations currently conducting projects in Afghanistan include the UNHCR, the World Food Programme (WFP), UNICEF, the International Red Cross, and various NGOs, all of which have been active there since the time of the country's civil war. These organizations are currently providing humanitarian aid. Even in the absence of a functioning government, such

projects can be implemented directly through local communities or NGOs. But in the shift now to promoting reconstruction and development, there are structural problems. The development assistance organizations—the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the UNDP, and so on—will give money to the Afghan government, but because the central government is still weak, there are concerns that the money will not reach the people who really need help.

The Tokyo conference led to the establishment in Kabul of the Implementation Group (IG) chaired by the AIA. With the participation of the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the UNDP, and the four conference co-chairs (Japan, the United States, the EU, and Saudi Arabia), the IG will handle continuing coordination of the projects and activities receiving aid and the geographical regions to which it goes. The first IG meeting was held in March.

Sasae: It is good to see the emergence of this kind of organization, at least in form, and it is good that Afghan ownership of the reconstruction effort was also discussed. In the process, AIA chairman Karzai also stressed that he would do his utmost to ensure accountability and transparency in the Afghan government.

In the discussions during and surrounding the conference, your approach to linking humanitarian aid and reconstruction and development has been to emphasize bottom-up measures, focusing on creating the conditions for permanent settlement in the regions to which the refugees have returned. You stress the importance of schools, hospitals, water supply facilities, and so on, in promoting community building. But this effort also faces some difficult problems, such as in the relations between the central and local governments.

Ogata: A major issue here is whether or not to deliver all aid funds through the central government, and if so whether or not they will reach the targeted local communities quickly enough. If, on the other hand, aid is provided directly to the provincial governments, ignoring the central government, it might serve simply to empower the local clans and other groups that

until recently have held sway in the regional areas, thereby destroying the balance in the country as a whole. In my view, as far as possible the actual aid should go to local communities while all relevant information is channeled through the central government.

Sasae: The conference also drove home the importance of finding effective ways to restore public peace and order, put a stop to narcotics production, collect weapons, and dispose of land mines, among other tasks.

Ogata: Public peace and order affects all other conditions. It is also the primary factor determining the repatriation of refugees. At present, an international security force is being deployed only in Kabul, but AIA chairman Karzai told us that many ordinary Afghans want the force to be expanded nationwide. The United States says that large numbers of security troops coming into the country while American combat operations continue would only make its task more difficult. Also, sending troops is costly; even though they might want to send more, many countries could not afford the expense.

Meanwhile, Afghanistan needs national military and police forces. Until now, peace in the provinces has been maintained by powerful local clans using their own private militia. The challenge now is to find ways to develop the system of regionally based militia into a national one. Who will lead and train such forces? The central government, eventually, but it has a very long way to go first.

Japan's Role

Sasae: How do you see Japan's role in the reconstruction of Afghanistan? How does Japan fit into the overall effort, and what initiatives should it take?

Ogata: First, Japan needs to commit itself firmly to the Afghanistan reconstruction plan. This means ongoing and carefully thought-out contributions of equipment, materials, and funds for repatriating, settling and rehabilitating refugees, for reconstruction, and for removal of land mines. It will also involve helping to streng-

then educational institutions, medical services, broadcasting infrastructure, and so on. Regarding reconstruction and the repatriation and settling of refugees, I think efforts can be gradually expanded throughout Afghanistan, using the Azra Initiative as a model.

At the same time, as one of the co-chairs of the Tokyo conference, Japan has a leading role in coordinating the efforts of other participating countries. Japan can take part in consultations on how and from whom money is to be provided for projects devised by international organizations. It can also work bilaterally with other countries. Russia, Pakistan, Iran and some other countries have already offered to collaborate with Japan on joint projects. As a country generally perceived to be neutral and one whose own recovery after World War II is widely admired, Japan is expected to play a substantial part in the overall reconstruction process.

Finally, Japan has an important diplomatic role. Afghanistan occupies a crucial geographical position, the nexus of countries to the north, south, east and west. Because of the nature and extent of its involvement, Japan can make a vital contribution in helping to give direction to the region as whole.

Sasae: You once said that looking out on the world from the window of Japan did not provide a very clear view. Through active involvement in the effort to assist and rebuild Afghanistan, Japan is gaining increased recognition for the diplomatic breadth and reasoned and informed stance toward the world that such involvement is cultivating. That recognition is also enhancing Japan's diplomatic influence. In that sense, I think the Tokyo conference brought great benefits on the diplomatic side.

There has been much debate over the role of NGOs in connection with the conference. How do you see their role?

Ogata: Afghan NGOs and Afghan staff members of international organizations have been active in this field for a long time. They came to Tokyo to attend the conference, interacted with their counterparts from Western and Japanese NGOs, and talked about how they could fulfill their various roles.

I said earlier that development assistance organizations usually should work through the government, but in Afghanistan the government is weak, and so tie-ups with NGOs and groups rooted in the civil society are important. Japan's NGOs are extremely dedicated and hard-working, but the scale of their operations is simply too small to have a large impact by themselves. I hope to see a shift toward closer international ties among NGOs, including project collaboration between Japanese NGOs and those from other countries.

Sasae: Considering all that needs to be done, the Afghanistan reconstruction assistance process will continue for some time into the future. In general, thinking about solutions for the refugee problem and responses to humanitarian issues, in your opinion what lessons can be drawn from this experience? In the areas of refugee repatriation and reconstruction, for example, it seems to me that it can serve as a kind of test case . . .

Ogata: I think that in the Afghanistan case the issues of refugees and internally displaced persons should be addressed by the same program. Both groups consist of people who were forced to move away from their home areas and are now returning to them. Programs of essentially the same form can be developed to help both groups return, while ensuring their safety and security. The immediate needs of refugees when they return are, of course, food and other humanitarian aid. Since they will need help in creating a normal community life as quickly as possible, efforts should be made to organize suitable reconstruction jobs to enable the returning refugees to engage in productive work. It is a tremendous challenge, but, in theory, this is what is being attempted in Afghanistan.

Sasae: Broadly speaking, that means providing human security—ensuring the livelihood of individuals.

Ogata: Yes. But what is important is to enable the people to take the initiative and carry on the process of rebuilding and development on their

own. Assistance must never become an end in itself, drawing people to refugee life and dependence. This approach is necessary in the resolution of any conflict. When the situation is dangerous, however, there is no question of leaving refugees to cope, unprepared. People must be there to assist the refugees until the danger is eliminated. Those people must assess the situation carefully and provide assistance in a way that leads to resolution of the basic problem.

Sasae: Finally, I'd like to ask what you want or expect Japan to do from now on.

Ogata: Particularly in recent years, Japan as a whole has become somewhat introverted. Yet this is a country whose livelihood depends on its relations with other countries and a stable international order. In today's globalized world, goods, money, people, and also danger move quickly. It is very important to understand that the political situations of your neighbors, of countries nearby, and even of countries far away affect your own country. Real security is more than keeping strong military forces. It has to be based on overall human security.

This time, the Afghanistan problem was widely reported in the media and public interest was extremely high. It gathered the momentum to produce an international phenomenon: a whole string of media personalities, politicians, NGO staff, and others actually went to Afghanistan, gained some understanding of the situation there, and came back and told the people at home. For the moment, there is a sluggish atmosphere in Japan now, from the prolonged business slump and inward-looking attitude. But I have also sensed a brighter mood dawning as Japanese recognize that others in graver circumstances are relying on them for help.

The key factor is sustainability of the effort. The media are fickle; a major incident of humanitarian concern sparks intense media interest for a while, but it quickly cools. Often the waning of media attention coincides with ever more tardy responses by development assistance organizations.

Sasae: Holding the interest of the media and

the international community is extremely difficult. Instead of maintaining steady diplomatic continuity, organizations and governments tend to refocus their efforts as the objects of public attention change. I think this is why the Afghanistan problem remained forgotten for so long.

Ogata: And perhaps it would still be forgotten today if it weren't for the 11 September terrorist attacks.

Sasae: Thank you very much for sharing your thoughts with us today. (*Translated by Dean Robson*)



Translated from the original Japanese, "Misuterareta kuni' de no mikan no shigoto: Afuganisutan Fukko Shien Kokusai Kaigi o oete," published in the April 2002 issue of *Gaiko Forum*. The April issue discussed perspectives on the refugee problem. The issue of refugees today, however, is extremely complex. Demographic movements of different peoples have produced all kinds of strains and conflicts, the solutions to which can involve seemingly unsurmountable difficulties. Since the 11 September terrorist attacks, moreover, intolerance has introduced yet a new dimension to the problem. The refugees of Afghanistan, whose plight was the worst in the world, would still be forgotten, declares former UNHCR commissioner Ogata Sadako, if it had not been for 11 September. This dialogue was held just after the close of the International Conference on Reconstruction Assistance to Afghanistan.