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The First Joint Relief Mission of Japanese Forces

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Generous support for Asian neighbors

The December 26 tsunami killed more than 150,000 people and left millions homeless, the number of casualties only increasing as the days go by. In response to this humanitarian crisis, and to help its friends in Asia, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi proposed a generous relief package at the emergency tsunami summit held in Indonesia on January 6. The aid comes in three dimensions: financial aid, human assistance, and expertise in dealing with natural disaster. Japan pledged \$500 million in financial aid. Japan's medical team was the first to arrive at the scene (dispatched under the Disaster Relief Team (DRT) Law) to assist in medical needs and epidemic prevention.

For the first time in its history, Tokyo has dispatched all three arms of the Self Defense Forces (SDF) implying that it intends to broaden the SDF's role in international operations in light of the new security policy released last year. The challenges in the coming days are to keep supporting the disaster-hit countries not only on an emergency basis, but over the long-term as well.

The first joint relief effort under the new NDPO

Of the Japanese relief package, the distinguishing characteristic is the joint relief operation by the SDF. The Ground, Maritime and Air SDF had been dispatched four times under the DRT Law to disaster-hit countries--Honduras in 1987, Turkey in 2001, and Iran in 2003. However, these three forces have never jointly operated abroad. The current dispatch was the first time all three SDF arms operated joint relief efforts abroad for an extended period of time. The number of dispatched personnel--over 1,400--has also been a record-high for an overseas mission for natural disaster's relief.

This coordinated mission reportedly took place in accord with the new National Defense Program Outline (NDPO) released on December 10 2004. The NDPO shows international peace cooperation activities as one of SDF's primary duties. These duties are considered second in importance only to national defense. In order to address these overseas activities effectively, the NDPO points out the necessity of preparing for a system which enables the SDF dispatch abroad immediately, and to be on duty there continuously. In this context, the Japanese government was eager to convert theory into action by dispatching the SDF immediately to tsunami-affected countries.

Furthermore, staying true to the NDPO goal, the Defense Agency seeks to integrate operations of the three SDF arms in March 2006 under the Joint Staff Office. Under this framework, the current independent command system will be unified and simplified. During this current relief effort, the JDA has set up a liaison base in Thailand so as to ensure smooth communication and coordination among the three SDF arms. According to a January 6 Yomiuri Shimbun report, "the assistance to the tsunami-hit region will function as a test ground for the plan."

Determined to provide long-term assistance

In most cases, attention is intense immediately following a disaster, but it tends to fade over time. According to the United Nations, the reconstruction process for the affected countries will take ten years. The important thing is not only to provide immediate and urgent relief, but also to keep providing assistance for

the long term. For example, there is a 15 year Japanese ODA project building seawalls around Male, the capital city of The Maldives, just 1 meter above sea level. The project took a long time and about \$70 million, but the seawalls saved 75,000 lives in Male during this tsunami.

More than 1,000 earthquakes occur in Japan annually, and Japan has seen big tsunamis once every ten years (1983, 1993, and 2003). Japan has much experience, expertise, and technology regarding tsunamis, and Prime Minister Koizumi showed his determination at a press conference that as a member of the Asian community, Japan would provide the maximum reconstruction assistance possible to countries devastated by the Indian Ocean tsunami. The important thing is, under the initiative of the UN, Japan will provide long-term, continuous support to the disaster area.

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