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by Nakamura Tetsu

I am affiliated with the Peshawar-kai Medical Services (PMS), an organization currently helping to rebuild Afghanistan. On Nov. 2, while we were working to build an irrigation canal in Kunar province, U.S. helicopter gunships apparently mistook our blasting site for a ground-based attack. As a result, two choppers peppered the area with machine-gun fire, and the peaceful atmosphere that had been maintained at the site was destroyed in an instant.

Kunar is currently the focus of a steady buildup in U.S. troop strength. The current level of local peace and order is the worst it has been in the 20 years I have spent there.

The poignant desire of Afghans, the vast majority of whom are farmers, is for food and a return to peace in their villages. Over the past four years, the eastern part of the country has suffered under an unprecedented drought, prompting the desertification of farmlands and the displacement of huge numbers of people.

Outside of the country, there is surprisingly little knowledge about how these displaced people have drifted into the big cities and now comprise one of the key factors behind the current deterioration of law and order.

Our organization has sought to improve these conditions by digging wells-about 1,000 to date-and an irrigation canal is also under construction. This latest project aims to support the return to farming of well over 100,000 residents, thereby making a modest contribution to regional rebuilding and stability.

But a spate of accidental bombings by the U.S. military, linked to its mop-up operations against al-Qaida, has quickly managed to fuel residents' hostility against the American troops.

As in Iraq, there are frequent attacks in Afghanistan, not only against the U.S. military, but also targeting United Nations agencies, the International Red Cross and overseas nongovernmental organizations. These acts of aggression by local people have already caused some international bodies to withdraw.

I imagine most Japanese find this difficult to understand, given that various groups traveled there with the aim of offering humanitarian assistance.

This local backlash comes in response to the approach of linking rebuilding aid to military intervention, as well as the tendency to focus on the needs of outside countries, which causes such assistance to be far removed from the will of the people.

At this point, the true sentiment of the Afghan people is that while the ruthless regime of the Taliban presented serious problems, the U.S. intervention is even more intolerable. Local people complain about how the Taliban has been replaced with American democracy, interpreting the situation simply as one repugnant system being cast out for another. Publicly expressing such sentiment, however, would simply earn them labels as al-Qaida collaborators.

In essence, violent intervention has failed to produce positive results. In other words, military troops are largely unnecessary in furnishing assistance for human survival and livelihood. The fact that before the recent incident, PMS had never once come under attack is evidence of this.

In the recent accidental bombing, our organization was attacked not by "terrorists," but rather by the "justice of the international community." If the Japanese government aligns itself with this "justice" and dispatches "armed forces" in support of that stance in Iraq, hostility toward Japan will also erupt in Afghanistan. Under that scenario, there is no guarantee our organization would not be targeted, too.

We have already been forced to remove our Hinomaru flags and the word "Japan" from our vehicles, and we now repeatedly declare that our activities have no connection with the Japanese government.

In peace, there is clearly a strength that exceeds that of military force. Tokyo's current tendency is to rebuke the very pacifism that has served as a core national platform in the postwar era as "unrealistic," while moving to approve not only the United States' exercising its military might, but also the dispatch of Self-Defense Forces.

In its ultimate implications, this leaning can only be labeled both risky and bizarre.

Nakamura Tetsu is a medical doctor and executive director of Peshawar-kai Medical Services which has provided relief and well-drilling in Pakistan and Afghanistan for twenty years. This article appeared in The Asahi Shimbun/International Herald Tribune, December 13, 2003. See Japan Focus for earlier writings by the author.

A new book on the work of Nakamura and the Peshawar Kai is featured in "Japanese doctor discusses 25 years of humanitarian work in Afghanistan (http://mdn.mainichi.jp/arts/news/20100305p2a00m0na018000c.html)," Mainichi Shimbun March 5, 2010.

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