"Before My Very Eyes, Children Killed by Bombing"

Nakamura Tetsu

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By Nakamura Tetsu

Translated by John McGlynn

Nakamura Tetsu, a Japanese physician, has worked in Afghanistan and Pakistan for twenty years as head of the Peshawar Medical Association, an NGO that he founded. PMA, in addition to providing medical care, also drills wells to provide water for drought-stricken Afghan villagers. In addition to the main hospital in Peshawar, a Pakistan frontier city on the Afghan border, there are three clinics in Afghanistan and two in Northern Pakistan.

In August 2002, Dr. Nakamura was the recipient of the First Okinawa Peace Prize. The prize money funded the construction of the Okinawa Peace Clinic in Dara-e Pech, Afghanistan. For his speech at the prize ceremony click here (http://www.japanfocus.org/products/details/1782).

(http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?SectionID=44&ItemID=2377)*Dr. Nakamura is the author of A Doctor Drilling Wells, describing the yearlong fight to resist the drought that devastated Afghanistan in 2000-2001. (http://www.hatemi.jp/japanese/jDDW.html)*

(http://www.hatemi.jp/japanese/jDDW.html)*This article appeared in The Okinawa Times on January 26, 2003.*

Life sometimes takes a curious turn. At exactly the moment that *The Okinawa Times* asked me to write this essay, I received a letter from a former patient who had been hospitalized after suffering a stroke. She wrote to thank me for the medical care I had given her then. A native of Okinawa and a survivor of the Himeyuri (Lily) Corps[1], the woman also added some personal reflections in a calm fashion.

She wrote, "On this earth, where living creatures move, we see one horrible event after another. I fear more than anything else war that can easily be triggered by people who know nothing of war . . . . Yamato culture has disappeared, and with it the soul, spirit and pride of the Japanese people. I feel deeply sorry for our ancestors, who worked hard to build a country beautifully dotted with rice fields."

Around the time I received her letter, the Japanese media was all astir over the abduction of Japanese citizens by the North Korean state in the 1970s and after. One day when I visited Tokyo I heard a taxi driver say, "Yeah, it looks like war (with North Korea)." The atmosphere throughout Japan was such that if one tried to point out that sixty to seventy years ago, our Japanese military used force to transport tens of thousands of Koreans to Japan, mostly for forced labor, one might be lynched.

In this situation, the letter from my former patient allowed me a brief respite.

Exactly one year earlier, the bombing of Afghanistan and its reconstruction dominated conversation in Japan. Fortunately or unfortunately, at that time I and other members of the Peshawar Society were going around the country to talk about our work. That experience enabled us to form deeper ties to Okinawa.

In January 2002, I was invited to Okinawa to talk about local conditions in Peshawar and the surrounding area. As I spoke, I was surprised to find myself moved by the earnest attention of the audience. Moreover, we were the first recipient of the Okinawa Peace Prize later that summer, an occasion that filled me with special emotion.

One of my uncles died during the battle of Okinawa. My grandmother had misty eyes each time she told us "nothing is more painful in this world than losing one's child." The sentiment of mourning for loved ones is the same in Afghanistan. Numerous Afghan children have been killed by aerial bombings, including cluster bombs, dropped by the American military. In the chaos of war, food shipments were held up, which led to starvation and death.

When I visited Okinawa having witnessed these tragic events, it struck me as too heartless that American military planes were taking off from bases in Okinawa, whose people have suffered in war, to fly bombing missions over Afghanistan.

The main hospital facilities that my organization operates are in Peshawar, a city located on the frontier of Pakistan

near the border with Afghanistan. Peshawar, the border city where our main hospital is located, and Okinawa, are not merely tied together through an abstract idea of "peace." Located on the Pakistan frontier, Peshawar is an international city in Central Asia, where, from ancient times, Eastern and Western cultures mingled, giving it a name "crossroads of peoples."

Not only that, for its role as "the shield for the mainland," Peshawar somehow resembles Okinawa. The national government offers military bases to the U.S. military to "support the war on terrorism," and receives support in exchange. This is because, unless they do so, the country will collapse. One shared feature in particular should be highlighted: like Peshawar, which shields the bulk of Pakistan, Okinawa functions to shield the Japanese mainland from foreign intrusions. That is to say, the central governments of Japan and Pakistan, under agreements that stem from their "cooperation in the war on terrorism," have given the US military the right to operate bases in Peshawar and Okinawa. In return, the US has agreed to provide economic assistance.

However, serving as a shield is unbearable for some. In autumn 2002, the proud inhabitants of the Northwest Frontier (NF) Province of Pakistan, where Peshawar is the capital, gave voice to powerful anti-American and pro-independence sentiments. The NF provincial government has openly criticized the American military and professed an unwillingness to cooperate in anti-terrorist actions. Near the border with Afghanistan, there are episodes in which NF soldiers, supposedly friends of the US, have exchanged gunfire with American soldiers. This outbreak of hostility springs from underground connections to Afghanistan, and is definitely creating disquieting signs.

Meanwhile, Okinawa serves as the largest US military base in Asia. For assuming this task, Okinawa, for better or worse, has received consideration distinct from the Japanese mainland. In his final message in June 1945 shortly before committing suicide, Rear Admiral Ota Minoru wrote these words: "Thus fought the Okinawans. I sincerely request that special consideration be given to the citizens of this prefecture for generations to come." "Special consideration" was indeed given, but it meant continuing to be the shield for the mainland.

In my view, few Japanese living on the mainland realize that both economic prosperity and pacifism have been supported by special war procurements that used Okinawa as a stepping stone for the U.S. military. I, too, was among the rest who were unaware of the price. But now I experience a sense of betrayal, as I gain, in addition to Peshawar, a solid sense of the backstage Okinawa.

"Okinawa" to me represents hope for recovering important values that the mainland has lost. It is also the substance itself, where the absurd continues to exist even as it is absurd.

[1] The Himeyuri (Lily) Corps was comprised of several hundred female high school students and teachers from elite schools who were drafted in early 1945 to serve the Japanese army as nurses during the Battle of Okinawa. Many died in battle or committed suicide at the command of the Japanese military after the cave they were working and hiding in was surrounded by US soldiers. The battle over how to remember them—as victims of a brutal and reckless Japanese military or as heroic martyrs sacrificing themselves for the nation—continues unabated.

Translated by John McGlynn for Japan Focus.

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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