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What Have Japan's Self-Defense Forces Accomplished in Iraq?

By Watai Takeharu

On December 8, 2005 Prime Minister Koizumi announced that Japan's Self-Defense Forces would remain for another year in Samawa in support of the US war in Iraq. Their mission: to provide "reconstruction and humanitarian assistance". What has the 500 person SDF mission accomplished and at what cost? How have local people responded to its presence?

On July 24th this year, the highway between the border of Kuwait and Samawa in southern Iraq became the main artery for maintaining the presence of 140,000 US soldiers in Iraq.

The big trailers and trucks which have the word "logistics" on them made a long line among the many tankers carrying crude oil. A "keep to the right three lanes" road changed into a "both directions six lane" road by avoiding the traffic jam made by those US trailers. Cars cross the lanes from right to left one after another and overtake the cars. The rule is that if an oncoming car emerges, both of them have to slow their speed and change lanes to give way.

There were many four-wheel drive cars of the civil military corporation on the lanes. But it is hard to tell them from the other ones. When some tried to pass them, they showed an automatic rifle from their passenger seats to threaten them.

It is not the rule of the road that rules these roads in southern Iraq, but it is "a tacit agreement" that military cars and cars with rifles are always the priority, and other cars must not approach them as far as they can. This represents the status quo that it is neither law nor social order, but military, guns, and arms that rule.

A year passed since I last visited Samawa, when the sovereignty had just transferred last July. Many Iraqi military patrols were everywhere in the town, instead of the US military. I saw neither the SDF, nor the 600 British and Australian military forces that should have been stationed there. Even during the long "lunch break," there are few people in the town and almost all the shops are closed. In evening, about 6 o'clock, customers start appearing on the street.

It is a common sight we can see around Baghdad of Iraqi solders wearing a knit mask with holes for eyes, holding a gun at ready on a compact pickup, but it was the first sight that appeared here, Samawa. Their "alarm level" and "tension level" are higher than expected, so that it was not the atmosphere in which we could approach them easily.

Until last year, the alert level of Samawa was not so high, and there were easy-going policemen directing traffic, and sometimes Netherlands troops' cars patrolling the town, and police security forces at the check gates. However, Iraqi soldiers are now on the lookout for the men of armed organizations from other places. British and Australian soldiers for maintaining security are seldom out of in public -- they are just advisors.

In fact, an element of concern in Samawa comes from the presence of those foreign troops like the SDF, British, and Australians, and the voices of some of the local population are against these deployments.

"Kahrabaa! (electricity), Maa! (water), Amal! (work)"

These Arabic words were repeated before the SDF dispatch, too, but now the citizens' voices insisting on these things make us feel their resignation, despair, and sometimes hostility toward the SDF.

Kahrabaa (electricity) is the most serious problem that everyone insists upon first. The best selling product is an aircraft generator on the commercial avenue in the central square of Samawa when the temperature goes higher than 50 degrees at noontime. The popular and cheap small-sized model that says "ASTRA / MADE IN KOREA" costs 85,000 Dinars (about 65 Dollars).

"After the five-hour blackout, we can have electricity for only one hour. This repeats many days. However, because of this blackout, more and more people are coming out to buy generators to make ceiling fans and air conditioners work, since they can't stand this fierce heat. However, I cannot be pleased about these good sales honestly, because it is such a bad condition," said Abd-Ali, the electronics store owner. The new electric power station will be constructed by using "free financial aid" from the Japanese government, but only the place is decided now. It will be much later that the actual construction will be started.

The Maa (water) problem is coupled with the Kahrabaa (electricity) problem. Water is pumped by machines. So, if the electricity is stopped, water is too. What's worse, water cannot be pumped into the high places of five-story housing developments. Due to the efforts of water purification and supply facilities given through ODA, the provision of water supplies within the SDF camp already stopped in February of this year. The 26 water supply cars, which bear the mark "Captain Tsubasa," sent from Japan, drive around Samawa. However, the citizens' demands were not for "water supply" continuation, but for "the maintenance of water and sewerage."

An SDF convoy in Samawa

In regard to the Amal (job) problem, sometimes men working to repair a road and doing construction can be seen at the edges of the town, but it is just a matter of day labor. There are many jobless people around the town helplessly sitting in the shade. Actually, repairing or repainting walls of schools and clinics that SDF ordered from Iraqis is being done on the periphery of Samawa. However, in regard to this, there are heightening criticisms like "These are jobs that Iraqis can do on their own" and "What and whom are we doing this for? Instead of this, we need improvement in the problems of electricity and water." Now, such work is being conducted in over thirty places around Samawa everyday, and there is possibility that the more they do work like that, the more they may receive antipathetic reactions from citizens.

Based on these three problems, the citizens' anger and dissatisfaction are gradually being directing against the SDF. On July 24th, the day I entered Samawa, Amar Haidar, the ex-president of the Japan Goodwill Association, had his jewelry shop bombed by someone. Thanks to that happening at midnight, the shop was empty, though two people were injured.

Until last year, a banner was displayed in front of the shop. It said "I will send a dear message to Japanese friends on behalf of all Iraqis." in both Japanese and Arabic. This was suggested by Mr. Amar. Last July, I revisited him and he said to me proudly "Samawa citizens are satisfied with the SDF activities here. The SDF will be a bridge between Japan and Iraq, I believe."

SDF public relations

Contrary to what he said, even in that time there were few citizens satisfied with the SDF work, and a year passed, and his shop which represents "friendship" with the SDF was targeted. Some say that the cause was personal resentment against Mr. Amar, but surprisingly there are few people who sympathize with him about this matter:

"The SDF and the 'Japan Goodwill Association' don't listen to citizens' hopes. What is the SDF doing in Samawa? I have never seen them working for this whole year and a half. It was a really peaceful town before the SDF came here..." (a jobless man)

"If they don't fix the water and electricity, they are just like the American troops. Recently, many people have come to think that way. I guess some Samawa citizens who opposed the SDF presence bombed the shop." (a mall employee)

A friend of the ex-president, Majid Zaher, also takes a harsh view: "Before the case happened, he seemed to have become afraid. This is because, these days, people who criticize his ideas are increasing. Maybe the cause was that he didn't ask anything of the SDF, but just kept saying, 'Friendship with the SDF.' So, it led to the attack from those who are against the SDF presence."

Until last July, actually citizens' direct criticisms of the SDF were few: Comments were made like "I don't know what they are doing, but maybe they are doing something good for Samawa." or "After the SDF presence, the Japanese companies will come." These voices were in the majority. Moreover, until December 2003, just before the SDF arrival, false rumors spread widely around Samawa: "Japanese companies like Sony and Toyota will soon come here." And after the SDF came: "It seems that the SDF came instead of Japanese corporations. The SDF will do the same thing that the companies would do." Like that, the fact is that they accepted the SDF in order to promote economic recovery.

However, one and a half years have passed since then, and such 'hopes' and 'illusions' have faded away. Citizens began to feel that the SDF hasn't solved the problems of 'blackouts, water failures, and unemployment.'

From this July onward, supporters of the Shiite clergyman al-Sadr often hold demonstrations within the city. Police fired guns, and some were killed and wounded. It was rare then to find someone who supported them against the SDF presence, and many Samawa citizens took a cool attitude and stood back from the demonstrations. But from this year, supporters have been increasing among young people and jobless people. What's more, Muhammad Al-Galawi, the representative of Mr. al-Sadr's office since this May, is 'hardcore.'

Those members are suspected of firing shells over the SDF camp, and of the bombing of an SDF car that happened this June. This time also, they have denied direct involvement in the case of the jewelry shop, but their attitudes toward the SDF have never changed. He responded in my interview: "As Japan will never forget the bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, we insist to the Japanese government that if SDF continues their presence here, we cannot deny the possibility that we will attack the SDF. As long as they keep staying here, we regard them as occupation forces. Thus, the SDF is one of our targets. The friendship between the SDF and Samawa citizens will never be produced."

"As long as they are one of the occupation forces, we don't see the SDF as the Japanese military. It is Koizumi's Army and what has

been sent by the US military. I used to like Japan and the Japanese. But because the SDF has been sent here, this friendship has collapsed."

"Keeping the presence of the UK military and the SDF here will lead to a worse security situation as in Baghdad. It is not troops that Iraq needs, but citizens' power. We will welcome you if you take off your military uniforms and weapons. I would like Japanese people to think about the Iraqi side, not just the SDF side."

'Electricity, water, jobs': They call for solutions to these problems; and at the same time the supporters of al-Sadr require the 'withdrawal of the SDF' in their demonstrations. And they absorb citizens' dissatisfaction so that they can control this hostility and direct it toward the foreign troops staying there. It would be still be OK if only the members of the Sadr group were complaining about the SDF activities, but actually I heard many voices criticizing like, "the SDF should get out of Samawa" and "the SDF is the same as the occupation forces" too. Furthermore, I heard alarming voices saying: "If this situation continues, we ourselves will attack the SDF next," as said to me by one jobless man.

The cost of the SDF dispatch is now over 30 billion yen in total for land-sea-and-air operations until the time limit in December of this year. The detailed costs have not been provided yet. Of this, 80-90% is used for maintenance of the presence of the GSDF in Samawa, including food, fuel, equipment, and labor costs. Considering that the number of SDF personnel is about 600 at anytime, we can calculate that it costs over 100 million yen for one member for a two-year presence in Samawa.

However, when I watched the SDF during a week in July, and was in front of the camp gate, all I saw were cars shuttling to the UK base camps. They refused to allow my coverage and photographing due to the "warnings of the Foreign Ministry." The SDF didn't do any activities at all after the SDF bombing incident happened on June 23rd, except for activities inside the SDF camp. Looking at their activity reports, they sometimes 'supervise and teach' at sites by repairing a road or a building. However, it seems to be nothing but an excuse 'for going out' as the evidence that 'they did work outside of the camp.'

Since the dispatch of January 2004, the SDF hasn't been able to show any actual achievements to Samawa citizens, in spite of the atmosphere of 'Friendship, Goodwill, and Interaction' that the Japanese government has emphasized. Now, the SDF personnel fear an invisible 'enemy' and the increase of this 'enemy' gradually appears among Samawa citizens. In the near future, citizens who cooperate with the SDF will be pushed into a more dangerous situation, and there is a higher possibility that they will be targeted. It is the same as what happened to American forces. The SDF 'areas' and the military 'areas' are becoming limitless.

Though welcoming the Iraqi Constitution draft on August 15th, the confused situation of Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds continues. It has resulted in the undermining of relationships between domestic religious groups and ethnic groups in the process of politics. Since the establishment of the caretaker government last year until the foundation of the transitional government, led by Shiites mainly, the hard-line policy of the 'occupation forces,' represented by US troops, was taken over by Iraqis, just like subcontractors. This has led to conflicts and power-brokering among Iraqis.

In this situation, the government cannot explain their reasons or forecast the period for withdrawing allied forces such as the American troops. This SDF dispatch is not an 'international contribution' or 'humanitarian reconstruction aid' anymore, but actually represents 'practical experience' and 'practice' for SDF personnel in a hot spot. Above all, this presence in Samawa seems aimed at being a step on the way to the 'next overseas dispatch' and the revision of Article 9, changes supported by those who advocate 'the effective use of the SDF' and 'peaceful use.'

Big flags -- the Stars and Stripes and the Star of David -- are painted on a road in front of the Sadr office. The gateman said: "Next, Japan!" Though he was laughing at the time, actually, this August the Rising Sun flag was added to the others. It may look like Japan has joined America and Israel as the 'enemy,' and it was just like the 'Axis' or 'Three Powers' Alliance' of sixty years ago.

Even before the second term ends on December 14th, there is no reason to maintain the SDF presence in Samawa.

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