

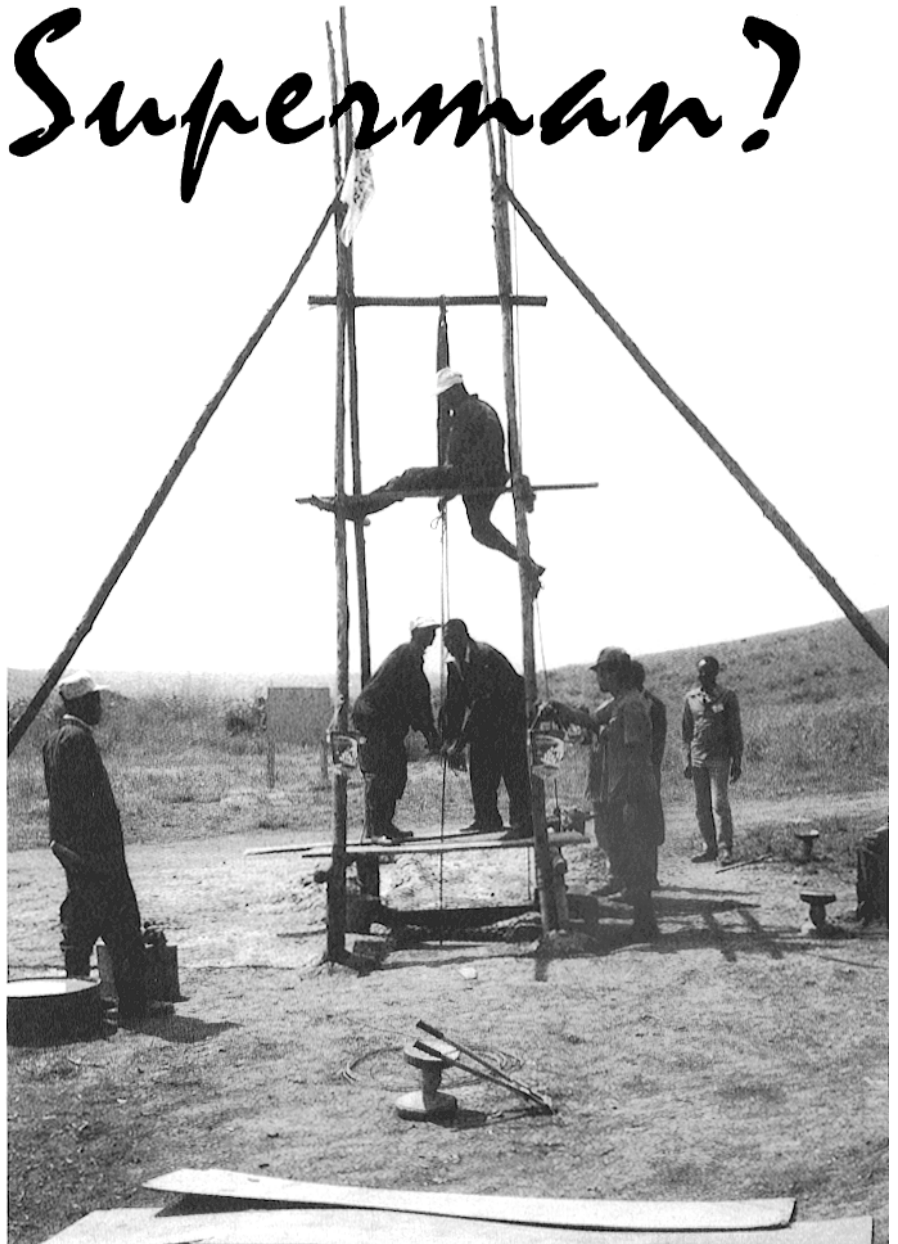
Is He a Superman?

“I will go anywhere in the world when needed.”

On 1 October 1994, Mr Hiroshi Komatsu left for the Tanzania/Rwanda border as leader of an emergency assistance group. He belongs to the Association to Aid Refugees (AAR), a Japanese NGO (Non-Government Organization). After the huge influx of Rwandan refugees into Tanzania and Zaire, Mr Komatsu and other staff at AAR discussed how to respond, based on an investigation report from an AAR branch office at a refugee camp in Zambia. AAR decided to send a well-digging group to refugee camps on the Tanzanian side of the border and appointed Mr Komatsu as leader.

Mr Komatsu is a 40-year-old engineer and is one of the first people in Japan who has chosen to devote themselves to overseas assistance. Japan still has a short history in this field and Mr Komatsu is a pioneer.

In 1980, when he started assistance work with the newly-established AAR, the first private relief organization in Japan, he was a student in the Science and Engineering Department at Nihon University. Just before graduation, he read an announcement from Professor Kawaguchi, who was working temporarily for the Asia Institute of Technology in Thailand as a member of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). Professor Kawaguchi explained the miserable situation of Cambodian refugee camps on the Thai border. All basic needs such as water, food, and medicine were short. About 1 million Cambodians were sheltering at the camps, without homes, families, and hope. On reading this announcement, Mr Komatsu made up his mind at once and flew to Thailand to support Professor Kawaguchi distributing relief goods at camps. “I loved to see the smile



■ Well Drilling by “Kazusa-bori”

(author)

of Cambodian children and it made me happy. They are so innocent. I learned a lot from them. It is ridiculous that they had to be in camps because of war”.

Even after Mr Komatsu joined Japanese National Railways (JNR) with an undergraduate background in traffic civil engineering, he never gave up his relief work for the Cambodian people. He visited camps more than twice a year during his short holidays checking that supplies and personnel were sufficient. Mr Komatsu also designed several projects, including job-training and language education in the

camps, so refugees could make their own living in their communities after repatriation. “I was really glad when the Cambodian people had the first general election in 1993 with the support of UNTAC,” he recalls.

However, the election was not the end. His next object was to support Cambodians disabled by land mines. Even now mines are buried all over the country. More than 30,000 people have been injured and the total is increasing. At first, Mr Komatsu and AAR sent used wheelchairs from Japan. “Soon I found that disabled people them-

selves need to make, repair, and provide wheelchairs". Mr Komatsu then thought of opening a vocational center. After his work at JR each day, he drew blueprints for the building until late at night. He was convinced that this center would be a breakthrough in the independence of handicapped Cambodian people and in a social welfare system for the country. Finally, the center was established in 1993 in Phnom Penh, and now AAR provides about 50 disabled persons with job training and literacy courses each year. Wheelchairs produced at the center are distributed to local communities. Mobile literacy training is also started this year. Mr Komatsu's dream is becoming reality.

Sometimes, life changes drastically, and so does history. With the development of the Japanese economy, the world expects Japan to share international responsibilities. This has affected the foreign policy of JR which now participates in technical assistance to developing countries. In 1985, JR nominated Mr Komatsu to work for Tanzania Railways for 2 years, constructing nationwide railroads. This was a second phase in Mr Komatsu's life-long assistance work. "Africa was an unknown world for me. Everything seemed new and was different from Asia. Time passes slowly there". The cooperation work with Tanzanian Railways was exciting and his engineering speciality contributed to develop the country. "I felt helpful there". However, he never imagined he would go back to Tanzania again, for a more urgent task.

The shocking news of massacres and racial oppression in Rwanda reached the world in 1993. After France colonized Rwanda, they appointed the minority Tutsis for important government posts over the majority Hutus. After independence in 1973, Hutu President Habyarimana led the government. President Habyarimana tried racial integration and it seemed successful for a while. However, when Ugandan Tutsis invaded northern Rwanda, the hostility between the two tribes turned into violence. Hutu government troops and the Tutsi RPF were both heavily armed.

Despite a peace agreement in March 1993, civil war developed and genocide occurred after President Habyarimana was assassinated on 6 April 1994. About 1 million people have been murdered so far and the number of refugees is more than 2.5

million. The refugee camps on the Tanzania/Rwanda and Zaire/Rwanda borders have little drinking water because the sites are half desert. Polluted ponds spread infectious diseases. The UN was overwhelmed by the poor situation in the camps and made an emergency appeal to NGOs and governments. AAR and Mr Komatsu decided to take part in a water-supply project at Ngara camp, Tanzania.

AAR proposed to supply water in two ways: dig wells by machines, and by hand with simple tools. The latter method is called "kazusa-bori", a traditional Japanese way of digging wells used in rice fields with insufficient water. This technique has been successfully transferred to some Asian countries by Japanese NGOs. "If AAR can teach the African refugees this method, our aid will help them for a long time." says Mr Komatsu.

The digging machine arrived from Japan on 17 November in a Japanese Self-Defence Force aircraft. This was the first time the SDF had helped with NGO relief work and a comprehensive aid system is expected to be established in the future.

"I'll never forget my refugee workers' faces as we did our job together when they first saw the clean water coming out of our wells. They were full of delight. This is their accomplishment, as well as ours". Now the local people have mastered "kazusa-bori", they hope to dig wells back

in their home villages some day. Looking back over the past 3 months of his mission, Mr Komatsu says, "It is true that we were delayed a little because of lack of information and preparation. However, my staff are still digging wells, providing water both in camps and in local communities hurt by the refugee influx. The people who benefit are increasing, and techniques like "kazusa-bori" spread. We just continue".

A man of two sides: a Japanese businessman, and a tough coordinator in a conflict area. What is his motivation and where does his energy come from? "There are so many things to do around me". He wonders how to express himself. "The railways in Japan came from Europe and the United States about 120 years ago. Thanks to them, we could develop our country. Now it is our turn to transfer our techniques, our information, our know-how to developing countries". He added, "Maybe simply because I like to meet people, talk with them, and exchange opinions". Then what is his next goal? "There are so many places where help is necessary. I hope assistance work will one day be unnecessary and vanish from the earth".

Looking up at the sky, he smiled, "I've always been happy, because I believe my life, my effort, and my existence have been valuable in some way". ■



■ Mr Komatsu with Rwandan Friends

(author)