

Column 11

Peacebuilding through Improving People's Lives

—Japan's Assistance for Human Resource Development for Peacebuilding—

In fiscal 2007, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA) initiated the "Pilot Program for Human Resource Development in Asia for Peacebuilding" to cultivate Japanese as well as Asian civilian personnel in the field of peacebuilding.

Hiroshima University, commissioned by MOFA, established Hiroshima Peacebuilders Center (HPC), to implement this program. This program consists of a six-week intensive coursework on peacebuilding and an overseas attachment at field offices of international organizations or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) being engaged in peacebuilding.

Ms. Ayako Higuchi is one of the participants of this program, who completed an overseas attachment at the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Timor-Leste (East Timor). As Ms. Higuchi successfully demonstrated her outstanding performance, she acquired a post at the office to work as a program officer after the program. Ms. Higuchi shares her story below, describing her dreams and ambitions as a peacebuilder and her diverse experiences in the field.*¹

Ayako HIGUCHI

Dili, UNDP Timor-Leste

Children run barefoot through streets lined with dilapidated huts roofed with banana leaves. Broken utility poles that have long ceased to pass electricity and newly-built cemeteries can be seen here and there – These are some of the sights I witnessed in Oecusse*², which was one of the poorest districts in Timor-Leste, about 50 minutes by helicopter from the capital.

In November 2007, I joined UNDP Timor-Leste to gain practical work experience as one of the first program associates of the "Pilot Program for Human Resource Development in Asia for Peacebuilding." As I had resigned from my previous job to pursue post-graduate education overseas, wishing to contribute to the conflict prevention and to work for people suffering from conflict, the program indeed provided the very gateway for my professional career in peacebuilding.

At UNDP Timor-Leste, I was assigned to the Pro-Poor Policy Unit, which puts forward policy recommendations and conducts various research related to poverty reduction. My main assignment was to prepare the National Human Development Report and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) Report of Timor-Leste and Oecusse. Some may associate human development and the MDGs more with the field of development than with peacebuilding. However, I believe that human development and achievement of the MDGs, including poverty reduction, are vital for the success of the peace consolidation process in Timor-Leste. Although Timor-Leste gained its long-sought independence from Indonesia in 2002, some Timorese say that living conditions during Indonesian time was better than that of today. In fact, the electricity that used to be ensured in many places, including Oecusse, is not stable after the independence.

Moreover, the end of conflict did not necessarily lead to a significant improvement of people's lives. According to the latest Human Development Report (2007/2008), Timor-Leste ranked 150 out of 177 countries in the Human Development Index, indicating Timor-Leste as one of the poorest countries in Asia. Without enhancement in the quality of people's lives, we cannot deny the possibility of people resorting to violence. For example, the high unemployment rate among the youth can become a source of social instability in Timor-Leste. In other words, human development and the MDGs such as poverty reduction, greater access to education, gender equality, and political participation can help enhance people's lives in Timor-Leste, which can lead to the stabilization of society, conflict prevention, and peacebuilding.

In villages of Oecusse, I met many people who had lost their fathers, husbands and brothers in Timor-Leste's struggle against Indonesia. For the people of Timor-Leste, memories of the conflict still remain fresh, and yet to be

overcome. At the same time, I heard hopeful stories from people that they were now able to send their children to high school or to earn cash income by selling vegetables. I hope to continue working in Timor-Leste, so that these stories of hope expand even further, and contribute to consolidating peace in this country.



Inspecting an afforestation project in Ainoro District (the writer is on the right)
(Source: Ms. Higuchi)



Coworkers at the office (the writer is on the far right) (Source: Ms. Higuchi)



*1 The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations.

*2 A detached district in Timor-Leste